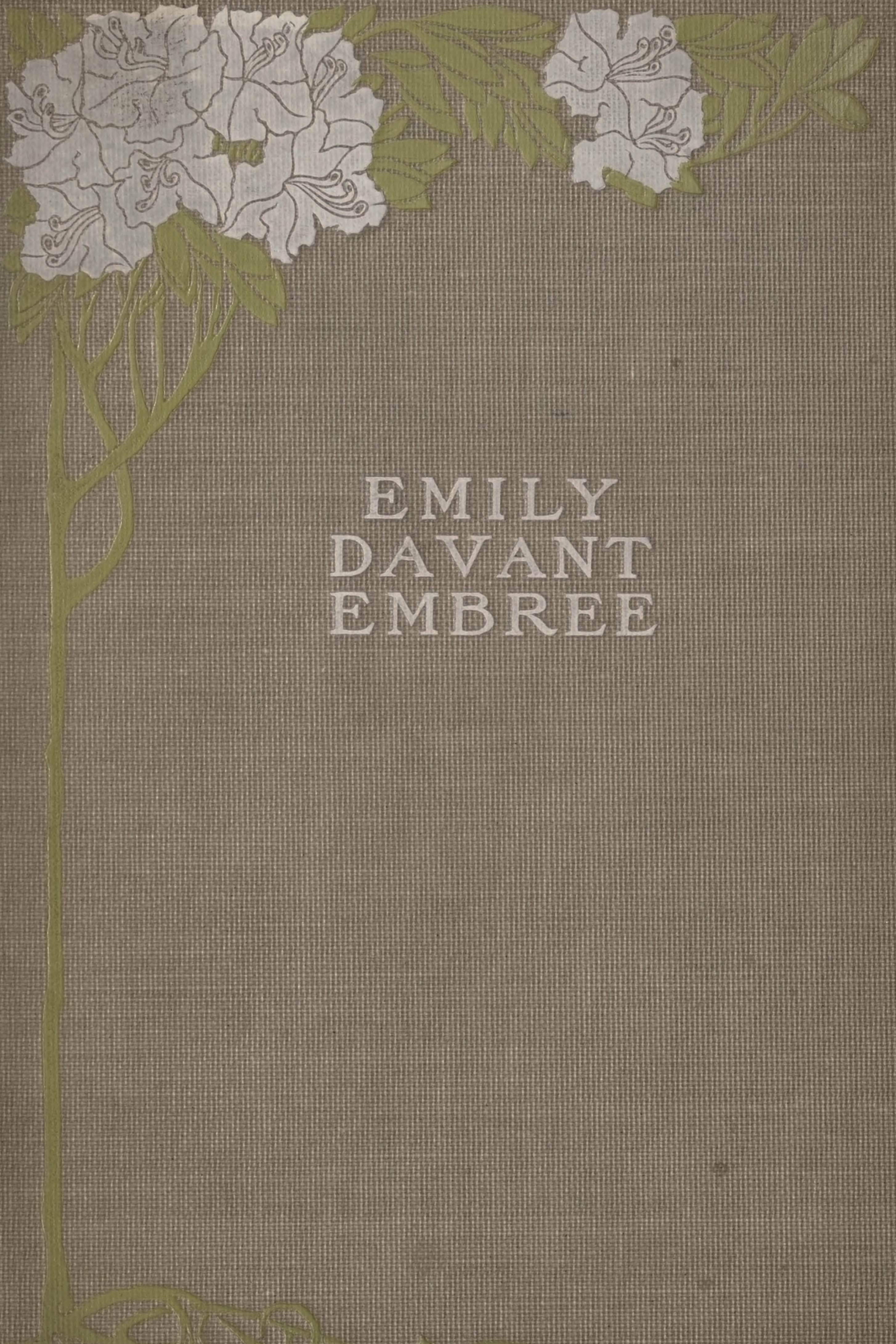
MINE · INHERITANCE



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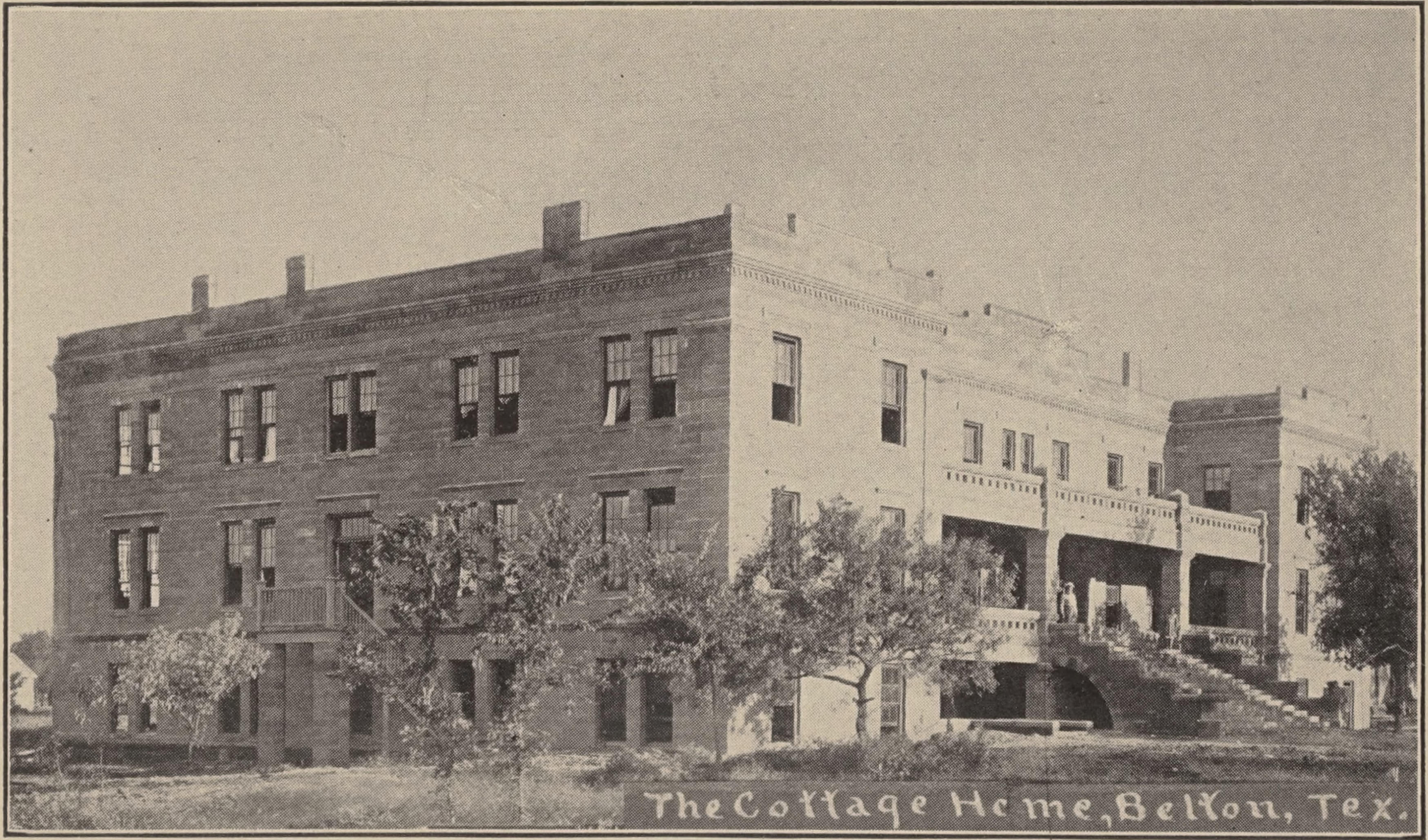

"THY MEMORIAL, O LORD, THROUGHOUT ALL GENERATIONS."

(Inscription over entrance.)

MINE INHERITANCE

By
EMILY DAVANT EMBREE

THE COTTAGE HOME
BELTON, TEXAS

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THIRD THOUSAND

To
My Father and Mother
This simple story is
lovingly dedicated
by the Author

Preface

WITH us all, especially in our youth, there is a desire to measure mankind by the same rule, and decide that each individual is wholly good or bad.

If we might look back of them and see the weakness or strength, the desire for immoral or upright surroundings that was handed down to them by their ancestors, perhaps our measurement would be less rigid, perhaps instead of condemnation we would find it in our hearts to offer a prayer, when we saw against what odds some fought before they fell.

Because my first story has been so kindly received, I feel encouraged to offer this, hoping it may help some to be more loving in their judgment of others, and to remember that, had they been placed in the same circumstances, they might not have fought so bravely as the one they so readily condemn.

And I pray, if this little story falls into the hands of some one who finds himself beaten in the struggle of life, that he may learn to look to Him from whom cometh all strength.

EMILY DAVANT EMBREE

The First Introduction

The richly deserved popularity of the first book of this gifted author, bespeaks for this one a glad welcome by all who love the natural, true and beautiful in character and life.

Having a heart fired with a holy zeal for doing all possible good, the writer not only gives to the reading world another choice piece of literature, but gives it in such a way that the profits made from this book go to increase an educational fund for those who most need it.

The picture herewith given represents the school home of a large number of college students who are unable to pay regular boarding rates, and many of whom have found their way to college by selling "A Lesser Light," the first book of this author.

Each one who purchases a copy will join the writer of these books in her efforts to emancipate from the slavery of ignorance those whose lives must be dwarfed and useless, but for your help and hers.

Ella Yelvington Ely.

The Second Introduction

THIS book is the result of a worthy ambition on the part of the author, to contribute something to the literature of the period in which she lives, and, at the same time, to give such a portrayal of the characters involved as will be helpful and inspiring to the reader. This is not intended to be "a popular novel," in the usual sense of that expression. It is free from the commercial spirit so perceptible in some books which are written to bring to their authors great gain in a financial way. The appeal is not to the dramatic or sensational. The emotions and feelings are pure and simple, and the sentiments worthy and true to nature.

This book, like its predecessor, "A Lesser Light," is to be devoted to the help of poor girls in securing an education, and to the creation of lofty sentiments and ideals which will bless womanhood, honor God, and help humanity in general. From the sale of the author's first book, many a worthy young woman has been helped to secure an education, to whom, otherwise the doors of opportunity would have been closed. If, while helping the needy and deserving, our distinguished young author has contributed to our literature, a book which, in a little over a year, has attained the sale of many thousands, may we not hope that "Mine Inheritance" will meet a reception no less hearty and unanimous? Those to whom the author is personally known, will bear witness to the fact that she exemplifies in her own home, and in her own life, those splendid ideals of Christian character,—womanly grace, exalted motherhood, and other feminine charms and endowments, so beautifully portrayed in her books.

Following the teachings of her Great Master, she accepts and puts into practice the doctrine of his chief disciple,—that women are most honored by the distinguishing designation of "Keepers at Home." While revealing to us the better part of human nature, and the noble graces of Christian character, Mrs. Embree depicts no less vividly the baser emotions of selfishness, jealousy, cupidity, and such kindred evils as war against the soul.

The ethical teaching of the book is most wholesome; its conception and literary merit, praiseworthy, its purpose and mission, most helpful and Christlike.

The author has honored her Alma Mater by her constant self-sacrifice and devotion. The plot of this story is delicately interwoven into the sacred precincts of the dear old college of her girlhood. In coming years others will fill these classrooms, other voices will gladden her hallways, other daughters will go forth to honor her name. Enlargement, equipment, endowment will come, we trust, but thou, dear daughter, hast come into the "Kingdom for such a time as this,"—to help others and to make possible the "Inheritance" of larger, richer, and nobler blessings for Baylor, for her daughters, and for all who shall read these pages.

W. A. Wilson.

Baylor Female College,
Belton, Texas.

The Third Introduction

To re-introduce to the reading public a book, already twice introduced in words so beautiful and befitting, is a task at once difficult and embarrassing. However, these considerations are more than offset by others. I am constrained by a sense of the honor conferred, as well as by a desire to give public expression of a genuine admiration of and friendship for the gifted author, begun years ago in the class-room here, in the relation of teacher and pupil, and confirmed by subsequent recognition of her many virtues as wife, mother and Christian worker.

One's literary off-spring will as certainly be stamped with some of the features of the author, as the natural. So in this book one cannot fail to find delineated those noble traits which the author herself inherited from her gentle, well-bred parents, and which were later but intensified by her placing herself absolutely *in touch* with the best influences of her Alma Mater, Baylor College. Indeed, as has already been published, by the sale of this book, she is but multiplying her philanthropic self, enabling many dependent girls to equip themselves for successful Christian endeavor.

She has infused her own spirit into the staunch heroine of her story, resolute, yet gentle and virtuous Mona. And so of the hero, who throughout is made the conspicuous object of the watch-care of God, who finally through devious ways brings David's career to a happy and successful issue. And in no uncertain tone has she so portrayed the baser characters as to awaken in our hearts that hatred of sin which our righteous God himself so plainly avows.

Mrs. Embree has lived the simple life. And while in this book so eminently fitted to impress for good the hearts and minds of the youth who are so fortunate as to read it, we have a story not complicated by an intricate plot, yet true in its delineations of character, and told in a style that attracts and sustains the interest from beginning to end. A good novel is not *fiction pure* and *simple.* To write one, requires the exercise of correct imagination and the ability to present the imagery in the garb of pure, refined and cultured words. Such an imagination "goes to the heart of things, is deep, earnest, and serious, and seeks always and everywhere for essential truth."

Then go, little book, on your divine mission of uplifting the weak, cheering the despondent, refining the crude, purifying the gross, fortifying the tempted, enriching the poor, and extending the kingdom of Christ in the world.

E. H. Wells.

Baylor College, Sept. 31, 1907.

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Mine Inheritance

CHAPTER I

PRESTON HOUSE

ON the western bank of the Mississippi, in the thriving town of H——, there stands a stately old home, whose very walls whisper of historic deeds. It is a typical southern home of the well-to-do class of people during slave time; a type that is fast disappearing all over the South.

There is nothing showy about this big square stone house, but there is an all-pervading sense of wholesome comfort, and unquestioned dignity. One feels it upon first entering the grounds through the low gate in the long rose hedge which separates the deep terraced lawn from the street upon which it faces. The impression of comfort and dignity deepens as you cross the lawn, made beautiful by smooth walks, well kept grass, and occasional flower beds of scarlet verbena or many colored petunias, while overhead the giant shade-trees with widespread arms invite the passer-by to their cool protection from the summer heat.

Yet this goodly lawn is but the setting of the house to which we now come. First we stop to admire the broad verandas, the lower bowered in fragrant honeysuckle, the upper open to the view of the majestic river, which we will feast our eyes upon, some brilliant moonlight night, until our very senses reel under the magic spell of this lovely landscape.

But we must go in. We enter the wide cool hall and the first thing we see is the broad handsome staircase. Above each landing of this staircase is found a pretty niche, from which the statuary is long since gone, but in each vacancy there is painted a dainty landscape, the fancy of some former owner, so that you wonder if, after all, you should really regret the absence of the marbles.

On each side of both upper and lower halls are great square rooms with high ceilings, massive folding-doors, deep windows and big, open fireplaces. Just beyond this main building is the large well-ordered kitchen, and well back of that upon the hillside are the old slave cabins, filled in the present day by the families of the servants. When this home was built, the town was hardly more than a hamlet, and the proud young owner could scarcely find anything fine enough in all this land to adorn his home for the queenly bride whom he brought to rule it. Right well did she rule. Joyous days passed swiftly, marred only by one shadow. The three children who came to this favored pair, as the years went by, were daughters.

Because the name of David Preston had been handed down to the eldest son for generations, the young father had vowed in a rash moment that none but a David Preston should inherit his beautiful home.

At last there came a day when a son was born. The father's joy knew no bounds. The child proved wilful from his very cradle. His father would not allow him to be controlled, declaring with evident delight, as he thought of the broad plantation and numerous slaves the child would inherit with the family name and home, "My son is born to rule." A little later he did not hesitate to boast in the child's presence that his son could not be conquered. Naturally, as the boy grew older, he gave his parents many an anxious day and sleepless night, though they proudly preserved a smiling exterior, and the father comforted his wife with—"Oh, he is just sowing his wild oats. He will settle down before long."

The daughters married early, as was the custom of those days, and the youngest went to grace her new home, in a distant state, just before young David was sent away to school. The father and mother had scarcely had time to rest from all the excitement and grow lonely, when young David appeared with a girl of coarse florid beauty, and announced that he had married and brought home his bride.

It was whispered that there were stormy times at Preston House over this, and in a few weeks young Preston and his wife were sent to make their home on one of the plantations, the father vowing in his wrath that no such woman should ever become mistress of his home. The mother quickly passed away after the fall of her idol. With the living, things went from bad to worse, and the breach between father and son daily grew wider.

The father lived on alone with the family servants, in the home he had hoped to enjoy in his old age.

Young David Preston awoke to his lost opportunities and tried to make the most of what remained to him. Procuring a good library, he devoted a large portion of his leisure hours to close study. In his wife he found a temper more violent than his own, a will that he did not care to oppose, and a coarseness to which he had previously been an utter stranger. From a wild, careless youth he soon developed into a stern, quiet man, of whom most people stood in awe.

Three sons came to his home and, had his wife been a wiser woman, the breach between father and son might have been healed and her husband restored to his old home. But she vowed, that if her father-in-law would not accept her, no child of hers should even bear his given name. Thereupon the old gentleman haughtily announced that none but a David Preston should inherit Preston House. But she carried the day and named her children as they came for her own people.

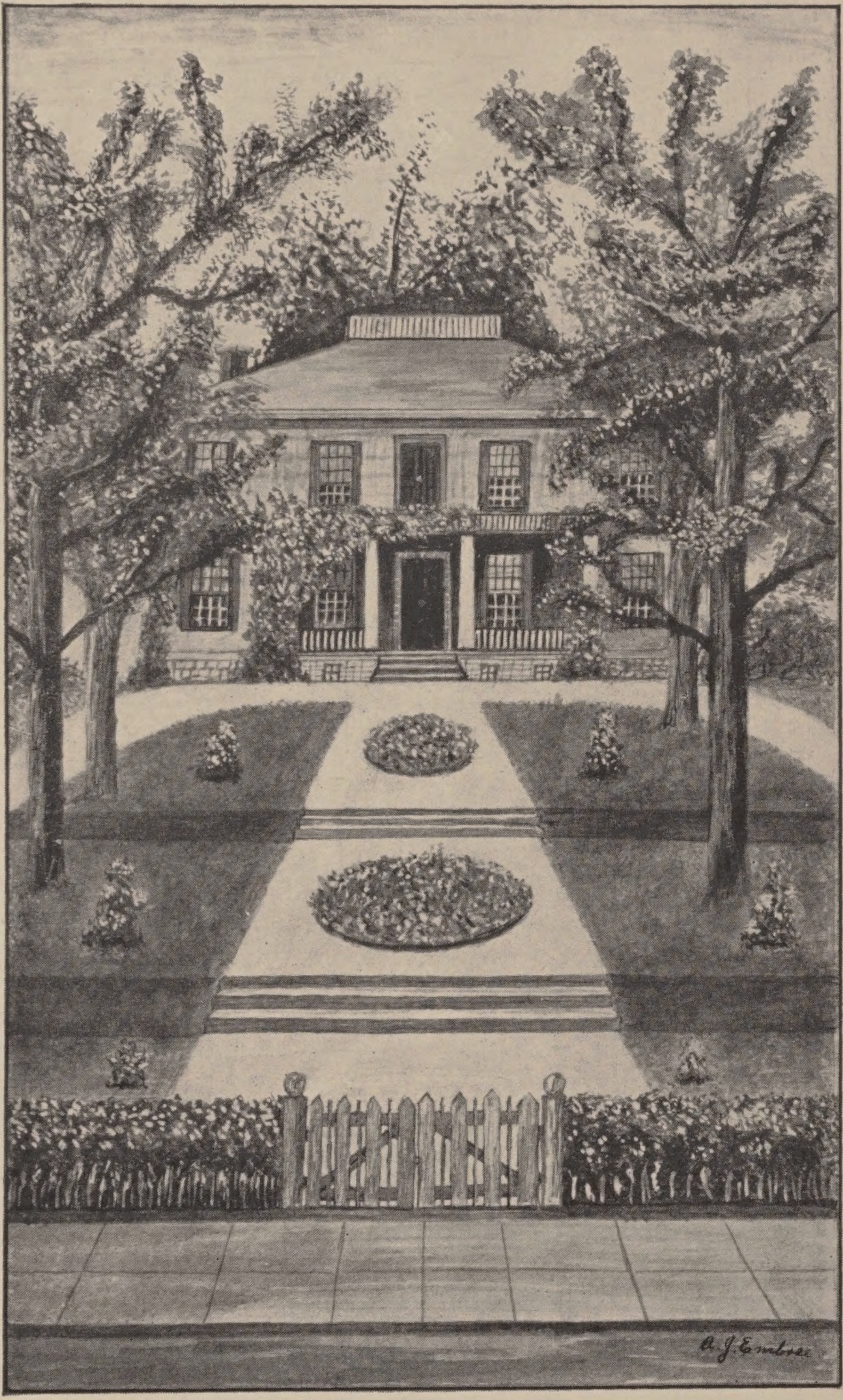
The eldest, John, inherited his father's proud, imperious will, with a certain low cunning from his mother.

The second son was a comely child and was given the mother's maiden name, Giddings. To his parents' great dismay, he retained the effect of a fall in infancy and, though his body developed into that of a strong healthy youth, his mind remained the mind of a little child. The youngest son, Richard, was the pet and plaything of the house, sunshiny, loving, amiable, making his way into all hearts; but with no strength of character he soon became the tool of his brother John. The child could scarcely talk plain when his mother died.

A few years passed quietly on the plantation, then a reconciliation was effected between the older and younger David Preston, and the latter, with his sons, returned to his father's house.

It was not long until the younger man brought a second bride into the old home; this time a gentle dainty creature whom he had known all her life. She was an orphan with only one possession of material value—a grown man slave. But this mattered little to the wealthy Prestons, for she had the bluest blood the county afforded, flowing in her veins, and though not much older than her oldest stepson, she was not counted too young for the younger David Preston, who was now in the prime of life and still exceedingly handsome.

The old father was delighted with his son's second wife. He had sadly missed a woman's hand in his home through all these years. "This one is good stock; blood always tells," he assured himself over and over again. So he received Martha Preston with open arms and succeeded in adding a great deal to her peace of mind. For



PRESTON HOUSE

with his father and grandfather both on her side, even crafty John, who had set himself against her, dared not trouble her openly.

Though possessing a handsome home and all the luxuries the time afforded, yet as the months slipped into years, the face of this sweet, refined woman grew unmistakably sad. Her friends decided she had married and gone into the Preston home out of sympathy for the family's past sufferings. Those who envied her, whispered that she had married David Preston for his wealth. Of both these opinions she was equally ignorant. She truly loved her quiet husband, and longed with all the eagerness of a warm tender nature for the caresses which he thoughtlessly withheld, until she came to believe that he had married her because he needed a wife, rather than for any special love he bore her. So she stilled her heartache and did her duty as best she could, until all but John loved her more devotedly than she could realize.

After a time there came to her the joy of motherhood. She too had a son, a beautiful baby with solemn, wondering dark gray eyes. Because she longed to please her husband, as well as his kindly old father, whom she had known and loved from her childhood, she immediately named her treasure

David Preston. On the selfsame day the delighted grandfather made his final will leaving his home and the greater part of his property to this youngest grandchild, at its father's death. In case the child died, the mother was to become its heir. The remainder of his property was to be equally divided among his other heirs. Two years later the old gentleman peacefully went to his final sleep, holding the hand of this idolized grandson, and his son became master of the Preston estate.

The year which followed was a hard one for Martha Preston. Her husband was much away from home, engrossed in the business left in his care, and the burden of managing this complicated family fell upon her. To this was added greater unkindness and insolence on the part of her eldest stepson.

John, taking advantage of his father's attention to other matters and the absence of the restraint laid upon him by his grandfather, and knowing that his stepmother would not make complaint, lost no opportunity of annoying her.

CHAPTER II

JOHN

IT was a dismal November afternoon. All day the rain had drizzled without cessation. Every living thing, both plant and animal, seemed to have but one desperate purpose, to retreat as far as possible from the chill insinuating dampness. The year was growing old and crabbed. To-day it decidedly had the blues. In the Preston sitting-room, all the family were assembled except the father, who had ridden away soon after the noon dinner.

Martha Preston looked unusually pretty in her dark red house-gown with its bit of lace at the throat and wrists. She was one of those women for whom lace and, in fact, all soft dainty things seem peculiarly fitted. The dark red of the dress gave a soft glow to a naturally pale cheek. The fine abundant dark hair waved lightly over the temples, and her clear-cut sensitive face stood out like a cameo against the window drapery. On looking at her carefully a close observer would tell you that every movement, every feature, indicated an exceedingly sensitive, delicate, nervous organization, which the calm serenity of her face wholly belied. Evidently her calm was acquired, not natural. In her dark eyes there was a sad wistfulness, and perhaps the head drooped a trifle wearily. She did not heed the group about the big cheery fire, her whole attention being given to watching for her husband.

On one side of the fire sat Giddings, called Gid for convenience — a big broad-shouldered youth, the very picture of health, yet possessing such a strange childish face. His forehead was high, and shaped like his father's. Between the clear blue eyes was such a wideness as to render his appearance peculiar, nor was this peculiarity decreased by a slight hollow over his left eye, just in the edge of the straight yellow hair. His skin was as clear and rosy as an infant's, and the red lips, which outlined the large good-natured mouth, were usually parted in a simple happy smile, though at times, it took but a trifle to rouse a violent temper. Then woe to the offender, if he did not possess the agility to escape, for what Giddings lacked in brain he more than made up in brawn!

Upon the rug, stretched full length, lay the happy-go-lucky Richard, gazing dreamily into the fire—a slender bright-eyed lad singularly unlike his brothers in appearance, and more like his father than any one else, yet entirely lacking either sternness or dignity.

Opposite Giddings, opposite in more senses than one, sat the low-browed cunning John. Just now he was busy, as he frequently was, teasing Baby David, a child some two and a half years old.

"Bruver Don, quit!" he finally commanded, fixing his big gray eyes upon that individual, with all the fierceness that his baby face could muster. John laughed, a low mocking laugh, and continued. The child said no more, but reaching up a firm little hand, he pulled his brother's nose with all his strength.

Even in his anger at the child's audacity, John did not move to resent it, without glancing first at his stepmother to see if she had noticed them. Finding her otherwise occupied, he deftly struck the child's arm against the brass andiron, while apparently bending over to stir the fire.

Instantly there was a shriek of pain, and before it had ended, Martha Preston was beside him and had caught the child in her arms.

"Bruv-Bruver Don burnt m-me, cause I pulled his nose," sobbed little Davie on his mother's shoulder.

She looked quickly at John who as promptly denied the charge, but the look of triumph in his close set eyes belied his words. At this juncture, Giddings sprang to his feet. Pointing his outstretched hand at John, he shouted excitedly, "I say, Muth-Martha, he did burn Davie, 'cause I saw him. He pushed him on the andiron, I say he pushed him."

Giddings stood waving the outstretched arm for some seconds with the accusing hand still pointed at John, evidently pondering in his poor bewildered brain, whether it was necessary for him to say more.

The scowl that John gave him was not lost upon Martha Preston as she deftly slipped back the sleeve of the little sufferer and examined the burn. There it was, upon the tender delicate flesh just below the elbow, a small five-pointed star, a terribly perfect copy of a star standing out low down upon the front of the tall brass andirons. With pale face and flashing eyes she turned to John and said, in a low, steady voice, "I have borne much from you, John, but you had better never let anything of this kind happen again." Then she carried the child to her room, where she finally relieved his suffering, and at last soothed him to sleep.

When she came down again it was dusk. Her husband was standing before the fire. John sat where she had left him, and she heard Giddings say, as he stood with outstretched arm and waving hand as before, "I say, father, John burned Davie's arm er while ergo."

The father without a word turned to John for an explanation.

The latter's eyes fell and shifted uneasily, beneath the stern gaze, but he said very naturally, "It was an accident, sir. I started to stir the fire and he struck his arm against the andiron. He was sitting on my lap."

"Did you see it, Martha?" inquired the man turning as his wife entered the room.

"No," she responded, in a low reluctant tone.

"Is it a bad burn?" he questioned next, eyeing her keenly.

"I fear so," she answered hesitatingly.

"Where is he?" came finally.

"Asleep."

The father slipped quietly up-stairs and presently returned with a heavy frown upon his brow.

John watched him furtively all the evening, but nothing more was said, except in sympathy for the child. John gradually recovered his composure, though he had really shown no more anxiety or uneasiness than could have been expected, if the whole thing had been an accident. It was quite probable that he had no intention of inflicting such severe suffering upon the little brother, for whom he really cared as much as his selfish cruel nature and his dislike for his stepmother would permit.

But before the flashing eyes of Martha Preston and the knowledge that she read his cowardly face like an open book, his former dislike changed to fear and hatred, which swallowed up every kindly feeling he might have possessed for her child.

She was a good woman, and though she endeavored to keep her baby away from him as much as circumstances would permit, after a trifling coolness, she treated John in just the same kindly manner as before.

He preserved a smiling exterior, but his cold calculating hatred was simply waiting an opportunity for revenge.

His opportunity did not come, however, for some months.

CHAPTER III

PLOTTING

IT was a sunny day in spring. The trees waved their garments of glossy dark green leaves and pale tender buds joyously in the gentle south breeze. The verbena bed flaunted its gay scarlet blossoms boldly in the sun, and the honeysuckle on the veranda filled the entire house with its gratifying fragrance.

Inside, Martha Preston was busy putting her house in order. "Yellow Jinnie" had already swept, and her turbaned head could be seen bobbing comfortably along as she led Davie up and down the smooth front walk, while his mother was dusting and arranging all the little things about the house, that could be trusted to no hand but her own.

Up from the kitchen floated the dolorous wail of some disconsolate camp-meeting hymn, as "Black Jinnie" cleared away the breakfast dishes.

In the sitting-room doorway stood "Uncle Bill," uneasily twirling his hat in his hands. His was a low stocky figure, and above it rose a round pleasant face. Across his cheek was a scar, which to him was no disfigurement, but rather a mark of proud distinction, because long ago, when Miss Martha was a baby, he had gotten it in saving her from danger, and Miss Martha was the idol of his faithful heart.

To him she was something more than mere woman. Her slightest wish was the law of his life. From her babyhood she had ruled him, with a gentle hand, it is true, but she had ruled supremely.

Now he had news for her, his beautiful "Mistiss."

He shuffled from one foot to the other, but Martha, busy with her own thoughts, and having her back to him, did not know he was there. Twice he opened his mouth to speak, but closed it again without a sound. Finally he cleared his throat, at which she turned quickly.

"Why good-morning, Uncle Bill," she said cheerily.

"Mornin', Mistiss," was his slow greeting. She looked at him curiously, for she saw at a glance that something was amiss. She made no comment, however, knowing that he would tell it more quickly if not interrupted.

“Missie ——”

This was his pet name for her, and she instantly knew from his tone that it was *her* trouble he had come to tell. “Missie, I ’spect you better fix the baid. Marse David say he not feeling right well this morning.”

He paused a moment, then glancing uneasily at her face, he went over and placed her a chair.

“Sit down, Missie, a little while, an’ I’ll tell you ’bout it. You see thet new hawse, ‘Shotgun,’ is kinder wild an’ Marster rode him this mawnin’. He seemed to get scared, sudden like, when Marster wan’t noticin’ and—and—he hurt Marse David, a little. I ’spec he’ll want to lie down when he gits here.”

“How is he hurt?” Martha questioned very quietly. She was a trifle pale, though to a stranger she would have seemed rather indifferent. But Uncle Bill knew better. He noticed that her tone was lower than usual, and that her hands were tightly clasped.

“Why, Shotgun fell on him, but,” coming a step nearer, “don’t you worry, little Missie, honey; he’ll be all right when he rests some.”

But Martha knew from the hopeless pitying tone, that things were more serious than Bill had represented them, though she said, "All right, Uncle Bill;" and went to prepare for the sufferer. Bill followed her and seemed to know instinctively what she wanted, and helped her with every preparation, though not a word passed her lips.

"Here come Pete and Big Sam with him now," announced Bill presently; and as he spoke, the two stalwart negroes bore their insensible master in at the open doorway. It was Bill who showed them where to lay him; it was Bill who helped Martha to undress and care for him until Pete brought the doctor; and through the dreary days and nights which followed, it was Bill who helped his "Little Missie" so faithfully with the nursing. The house was turned over to faithful "Black Jinnie"; little Davie was entrusted to "Yellow Jinnie's" care; the three older boys were left to their own devices, while Martha Preston hung anxiously over her slowly dying husband.

In this hour of trial, there came one ray of comfort. In his delirium David Preston coupled every endearing epithet in his vocabulary with her name, stroked her hair or face, and filled her aching heart to the brim with the tenderness she had so long craved. Just before his death consciousness returned, and drawing her brown head down close beside his black one, he looked long at the sweet, sad face and whispered, " You are more to me than all the world beside. I never knew real happiness until I married you. Stay here, dear, and take care of them all for me. Teach little David to love and respect you for his father's sake. God bless you! You alone have made Him real to me."

With that he was gone and she was left with a heavier burden upon her delicate shoulders.

John had moved about restlessly through his father's illness. Finding there was little hope of the latter's recovery, he searched for his grandfather's will. He did not admit, to himself, that he wished to destroy it. He persuaded himself that he would only hide it, and by so doing taste the joy of being master of the house and at the same time have revenge upon his stepmother. Failing in his endeavor, on the forenoon before his father died, he wandered restlessly along the river bank, wondering what changes the next few days would bring. He gave little heed to the beauties of the fresh clear morning, nor was he as much absorbed in grief over the thoughts of his dying father as one would have expected, except in so far as it concerned his own comfort.

As he strolled along, a beautiful butterfly lit on his hand, its dazzling wings quivering and shimmering in the morning sunlight. Almost instantly his hand closed and crushed the pretty emblem of frivolity; then he flung it aside. An exclamation made him start, and looking up, he saw a woman standing near him. Her eyes, her hair, and her homespun dress, all seemed to have been washed by the same laundress and all to have faded to the same nondescript hue. Her face was tanned and roughened by exposure and her hands were hard and brown. From one corner of her mouth hung an unmistakable toothbrush, and in her hand was an open snuff-box, which she had evidently forgotten to put away.

"Did you speak to me?" questioned John carelessly.

"No, I was just wondering what you killed hit for," she replied.

"Well, why shouldn't I kill it?" he asked with a mocking smile, as he glanced contemptuously down at the poor little dead thing.

"It was purty and it didn't do you no harm," she answered turning away.

"Are you camping here?" questioned John, as he pointed to an old wagon and a camp-fire a few yards away, which, in his preoccupation, he had not noticed before.

"Yes, we came here last night," was her answer.

"Who is with you?"

"Just me and my old man, that's all. We hain't got no children, and we are on our way to Texas."

For the want of better entertainment, John walked on with the woman to where her husband sat upon a fallen log. On reaching the man's side John accepted an easy-going invitation, and sat down upon the log beside the shaggy-bearded, unkempt stranger, and by way of opening a conversation, said: "Your wife tells me you are on your way to Texas."

"Yes, we'd a been there long ago if thar was any way for a feller to make anything as he went along."

Then began a rambling account of his difficulties, to which John listened impatiently, wondering why he had stopped, until suddenly an idea occurred to him which made him spring to his feet and pace restlessly up and down in front of the man. He scarcely heeded the long tale of misfortune as he rapidly turned his own plan over in his mind. Presently, he paused before the speaker, and the latter stopped his wandering remarks and looked up with a half inquiring, half hopeful expression upon his listless face, as John said, " Do you want to earn some money? I have a little money of my own, and I'll pay you twenty-five dollars to do something for me." The man eyed him greedily with his beady eyes and grunted his assent.

John paused irresolutely, looked his listener over, and deciding that he was well fitted for the purpose, he added, " There is a little boy in my way at home. If you will take him so far away that he cannot come back, and let no one see or know of him, I'll give you twenty-five dollars."

" Huh, that wouldn't take keer of the brat long," declared the man disdainfully.

" Well, that's all I have now, but if you will take him for that, I'll send you more just as soon as I can," promised John.

The stranger, who intended taking the first offer if he could do no better, with seeming hesitancy asked, " Whar would you send it?"

" I thought perhaps you could tell me a place to send it, and I'll send all I can," suggested John, anxiously.

" Yes," assented the man, after a moment's thought, " that will do," and gave his address at a small town some distance down the river.

" Very well, I'll bring the child, with the money, as soon as I can after dinner, if you can be ready to move by then. You see, you'll have to leave at once and get as far as possible on the road before he is missed," declared John.

" S'posin' they ketch me ? " inquired the intended kidnapper.

" Hide him in the wagon if you can. If they do see him, claim you found him wandering along on the river bank," suggested the ready John.

CHAPTER IV

TROUBLE

DINNER over, John was setting himself to devise some means of escaping unnoticed with Davie, when the old family physician joined him in the lower hall, and said, with all the authority of his position in the family :

"John, you boys had better not leave the place this afternoon. I don't think your father will live until dark," and then, because the dying man was his nearest friend, he choked and walked away.

The young man replied, "Very well," and, in secret dismay, strolled out across the lawn. Presently he espied Richard back near the smoke-house, playing with Davie. He joined them and said in a low tone, "Dick, I've got to stay here. You get David down behind that big wood-pile and when you are hid behind it, take him and go as fast as you can to the river. Go up the river and you will find an old rattle-trap wagon. Give David and this little bundle" (a paper containing the money) "to the man. Then come back as quick as you can, but don't let anybody see you. Don't let anybody here know that you have seen me, because the doctor said for us to stay here. He says father will die in a few hours."

Richard stared at him a full minute, in blank amazement.

"Idiot," ejaculated John, under his breath.

"I'll not do it," began Richard stoutly enough.

"All right, you'll be sorry, you little ninny," snarled his brother with an ugly look upon his face.

"Are you going to hurt Davie?" questioned Richard wonderingly.

"Of course not," declared John in affected surprise. "I don't want him hurt; I only want him out of the way a day or so."

"You are trying to worry Mother Martha, and I don't think we ought to do it, especially when she is in so much trouble already," said Richard in an anxious tone.

"Oh, come now, Dick, don't be a fool, and a coward. I know what I am doing. I am not going to hurt anybody bad. You are silly about that woman. You let her just wind you around her little finger. You haven't sense enough to see that she gets everything on the place for herself and her brat by her 'softy ways.'"

"Well, you remember you burnt him once and hurt him pretty bad and then made me get out of the way so father wouldn't think to ask me about it," retorted Richard.

"Oh, well, I didn't mean to hurt him much then, and I am not going to hurt him at all now. You just do what I tell you and I'll see that it comes out all right."

Richard from long habit of yielding to John turned reluctantly to his task.

John watched him coax the child away to the wood-pile, and heard him there propose a walk, to which came a gleeful assent. Then he rambled back to the house saying to himself, "That's better; David will go with him quicker than me anyway, and it will be all the harder in case of accident to trace the thing back to me, for I can make Dick keep quiet."

It was warm and the walk was too long for the child. By and by he wailed fretfully, "I so tired, Buver Dickie, es do home."

Richard took him tenderly on his shoulder and carried him. It being time for the child's nap, he soon fell asleep, to poor, miserable Richard's intense relief, for he loved the little fellow and dreaded leaving him in this cowardly way in strange hands. Nothing but the fear of John's anger kept him from turning back. Richard drew a sigh of relief at the thought of not seeing the little fellow's distress and grief.

He soon reached his destination, placed the sleeping child comfortably in the wagon, delivered the package into the man's hands and, after begging kind treatment for the little one, fled in an agony of fear, guilt and misery.

When he reached home, he and David had not been missed. His father was dying and, to his intense relief, no surprise was called forth by his own pale, distressed face, his appearance being attributed entirely to his knowledge of his father's condition.

It was several hours before the child was missed. Then John, begging that his dying father and his stepmother should not be disturbed, assembled the neighbors and all of the slaves, except Bill, who was left to wait upon his mistress, and made careful search in all directions, taking care not to go too far in the right one, though pretty sure that the man was by this time well out of the way, with his charge.

When Martha Preston turned from the bedside of her dead husband with well-nigh breaking heart, it was to be confronted with the intelligence that her child had disappeared and could not be found. Under this second blow, she fell insensible and remained so for many days. During that time, there was born to her a delicate baby boy. Her friends feared for her reason, for her life even, but this frail little blossom took hold of her broken heart and shattered life. Slowly she struggled back to health for its sake. Just as she was able to creep out into the sunshine once more, and her whole being was becoming centred in her baby, there came a third blow—her little one was totally blind. Many wondered how she lived through all this suffering, but if they could have heard her prayers through the long dark nights, they would speedily have recognized the source of her strength.

If by his wild life and mistaken marriage, David Preston had given to his first children an inheritance of sin, affliction and weakness, he had, without realizing it, made reparation in advance for the suffering they should bring upon the children of his second wife, and this reparation was made by choosing for his second wife an earnest trusting prayerful woman, who would become to these, her own children, a veritable guardian angel to win for them by her prayers and tears before God's throne protection from their older brothers.

It was at this time that her faith shone brightest. After continued prayer, there came to her a firm conviction that her first-born lived unhurt. Nothing could shake this belief, and commending him daily to a loving Heavenly Father's care, she lived, always patiently expecting her child to be brought back to her and keeping everything belonging to him in perfect readiness for his return.

To John Preston she was doubly kind, after hearing how faithfully he had searched for her lost darling. She felt that, in her heart, she had done him a former injustice. Now she did everything in her power to make amends. If her kindness produced any remorse, it was not perceptible, though he did manage upon one excuse or another to be much away from home. So Martha was left with Giddings, who understood none of it; poor miserable Richard, who longed to tell her what he knew, but dared not for fear of John; and the little blind Hugh, who in his baby helplessness became the comfort of his sad mother's heart.

CHAPTER V

THREE TRAVELERS

A WAGON slowly made its way through the swamps and forests of southeast Texas. It had crossed the Louisiana line into Texas two weeks before and had wandered since down the Neches River. One day it had spent in the low swampy land, and now, in the gathering twilight, it was nearing the village of B——, and the travelers were evidently hunting a suitable camping spot for the night. There were only three occupants of the wagon. On a pile of soiled quilts in the back part, a little boy lay fast asleep, while a man and woman sat, arguing in low tones, on the one battered seat in front. The entire outfit bore the unmistakable stamp of the "ne'er-do-well."

The rough old wagon had long since lost every vestige of paint, and in every way bore marks of long service, as it rattled along the dim road through the heavy undergrowth. Over the top stretched a dirty wagon sheet which let in the sun or rain, as the weather might offer, through the numerous holes scattered over its surface.

But in nothing was the shabbiness more evident than in the couple themselves, nor could one find any indications that they had ever known better times. The man's clothing was a slouch hat, a soiled shirt and a pair of faded dirty jean trousers. His face was covered with a rough shaggy black beard. His long black unkempt hair extended down over his forehead. Between the hair and beard were visible a pair of furtive black eyes and a huge beak-like nose.

The woman's shoes were rusty, her dress was dingy, her skin had that peculiar thick yellow look that the lack of cleanliness gives; but worst of all was the sad hopeless expression of the faded face, that had probably, at some time, been bright, girlish and pretty.

Evidently the suggestions of her husband were unpleasant to her, for she said pathetically, "We never had a child of our own, and I think you might let me keep this 'un, after I done tuk keer of him fur two year now, and love him like my own."

"No, sir," declared the man stoutly, "I've fed that brat as long as I be goin' to. That young feller writ the last time that he wouldn't send no more money, so I shan't keep him another day."

The woman sighed but said no more, as he stopped the wagon and hastily prepared to camp. The child too, awakened by the stop, climbed silently down from the wagon and stood watching the preparations for supper. He was a handsome little five-year-old lad, with clear gray eyes, dark hair, soft and abundant, and a certain air of refinement that his dirt and rags could not conceal.

It was a weird scene that lay about them. The tall pines seemed to the child almost to touch the blue summer sky. Far beneath them the sweet-gum trees tossed their many pointed leaves gaily in the gulf breeze. Last year's pine needles, strewn upon the ground, gave forth a wholesome fragrance. Here and there were scattered clumps of palmettos, the leaves glistening green in the departing rays of sunlight. Over a shrub near by, a wild wisteria had clambered, and its long clusters of pale purple buds were just bursting into fragrant bloom. Here and there, to the south, one caught glimpses of the smooth shining surface of the Neches River, with its wealth of lily pads wearing their crown of white and gold right royally. The child drew a long breath and looked about him wistfully. He was trying in his childish way, as he often did, to recall his old home, and his mother's face, but of late they seemed to be fading from him. At last he gave it up, with a patient little sigh, and turned to watch the crackling camp-fire as it glowed in the gathering dusk.

Presently the woman called them to supper. The man soon dispatched his meal and went to make his team comfortable for the night, but the woman sat listlessly, watching the child. As he ate she laid her hand with unwonted tenderness upon his arm and said, "Davie, ye are a good boy, and I think a heap of ye."

He looked up into her face wonderingly, to see tears glittering on her lashes. They made him uncomfortable, and as he could think of nothing to say, he laid his smooth childish cheek against her hand for an instant. The action seemed to please her, for she said softly, "I never had no little boy. I know I ain't your own mammy, but I wisht you would call me mammy. You always called her 'Mother' anyhow."

He pressed his cheek a little closer, then raising his head he said, "She's my mother, and you are my mammy, is that it?"

"Yes, that's the way we-uns'll have it," she answered in a pleased tone, which somehow gave him a strange tightness in his throat.

They said no more, for the man came back and sat down by the fire. The child could never help feeling afraid of him; so he sat quite still, nibbling at a bit of corn-bread and bacon, until she finished washing her limited supply of dishes. Then he crept back into the wagon feeling that it was his only home now. He lay in his little corner, looking out at a patch of sky through a hole in the wagon sheet, and listened to the preparations for the night, until by and by the man and woman also retired, and all grew quiet again, except for the noises that belong to darkness.

After a time he, too, fell asleep, with two little wet lines down his face, just a trifle cleaner than the rest.

It was not yet daylight when he was awakened by the motion of the wagon. He wondered why they had started so early; but from past experience, he thought best to ask no questions while the man was around. The eastern sky was just showing a faint band of light, and the stars had begun to pale, when the wagon stopped, and the man, finding him awake, whispered to him to get out and follow him. They had stopped near a little cottage at the end of a street in the village. Both they and the cottage, faced the deep calm river. Between the cottage and the sloping river bank was a broad walk. They went along this walk until they came to the gate. The boy could dimly see the shrubbery in the yard as he followed the man in at the gate and up the trim little walk. At the door the latter paused and whispered, "Set down thar on them steps and wait tell I come back."

The child obeyed, and the man strode back to the wagon and drove off.

The little fellow watched the wagon out of sight, sitting bravely erect as he did so. True, he felt a little frightened and bewildered, for the wagon had been all the home he had known for two years or more. Never before had it or the man or woman been out of his sight. These were all the friends he knew. They had been kind in their rough fashion, particularly the woman. They had frequently urged him to "be a man." Now he felt that they were trusting him, and he must show them how manly he could be. When they came back—and he fervently hoped it would not be long—they should find him sitting just as he was now. Then the woman would be proud of him. By way of passing the time he said "Mammy" over to himself a number of times, rather shyly at first, but presently he became used to it and grew to like it. It gave him such a pleasant feeling of possession.

Everything was very still and it seemed such a long, long time. The shrubbery was quite plain in the garden now, and the stars which had shone so brightly all night, had gone off somewhere to bed. By and by the little head drooped lower and lower until it rested upon the step above, and he was fast asleep. When he awoke again the sun was shining full in his face and he sat up in alarm. The wagon was still nowhere to be seen. He waited another long while, then a big tear slipped down his cheek, followed by another and another, but he made no outcry. He began to hear sounds in the rear of the house. By and by a wagon came rattling up to the side of the fence, but it was not his wagon. A man with some milk-cans before him rang a bell, then, while he waited, sat and stared at the boy, which greatly increased the little fellow's confusion.

HE WAS FAST ASLEEP

CHAPTER VI

THE STRONGS

AT last the door opened just back of him, and the child turned to find a stout, good-natured looking woman gazing down upon him in evident astonishment. Had she not been stout she would have undoubtedly looked prim, so spotlessly clean was her dark calico dress, her checked cook-apron and her beaming kindly face.

But she was stout. Her hands were plump and dimpled, her cheeks were like two round rosy apples, and altogether she was a most comfortable person to look upon.

"Mornin' Miss Strong, you seem to have somethin' new on hand," called the milkman with neighborly curiosity.

She paid him small heed, however, for she was already stooping over the forlorn little figure, with a slight cry of surprise, which brought her husband in haste to see the cause. By the time he reached her side, she had gathered the little waif in her arms and was asking, "Who are you?" in so kind a tone, that he ceased to be frightened and answered promptly enough, "I'm Davie."

“ Davie who ? ” inquired her husband over her shoulder.

“ Jest Davie, that’s all,” replied the child, never taking his eyes from Mrs. Strong’s face.

“ What are you doing here ? ” she questioned so gently that he felt sure of a protector and nestled against the motherly shoulder with a new sense of content.

“ I was jest waitin’ fur him to come back,” was the cheerful answer.

“ But who is him ? ” inquired Mr. Strong in a puzzled tone.

“ Why, that man that drives the wagon. He told me to set down here and wait tell he come back. I been waitin’ a long time, but he hain’t come yit,” and tears gathered in the child’s eyes, in spite of his efforts to keep them back.

“ No, I suppose not,” was the rather grim rejoinder.

“ Oh, Mr. Strong, do you suppose they have abandoned him ? ” inquired the motherly woman anxiously.

“ Certainly,” was the brief response.

Her arms tightened, unconsciously, about the child as she murmured, “ And we have just been wishing——” Then her eyes filled suddenly with tears.

“But we don’t know anything about him,” objected Mr. Strong.

“Couldn’t we keep him awhile? We might find his people,” she suggested.

“They evidently don’t want him.” Then turning to the child Mr. Strong asked,

“Was the man who drove the wagon your father?”

“Oh, no, my father is down deep in the ground. The man said so,” and the child shuddered.

“What did they call your father?” was the next question.

A strange, dusky face came dimly before the child’s mind, and he shouted in a shrill sudden mimicry, “Oh, Marse David, come hyar to Pete.”

The husband and wife exchanged glances, and the latter asked quickly,

“Marse David what?” The smile faded, and he replied soberly, “I dunno.”

“What’s your mother’s name, honey?” questioned Mrs. Strong again.

“Just my mother, the woman said,” and the childish eyes swam again.

“What woman?” inquired Mr. Strong. The boy hesitated a moment and then said in a low tone, “Mammy.”

" A colored woman ? " continued the questioner.

" No, the woman in the wagon. She wan't no nigger," he answered a trifle indignantly.

" Why, la, Mr. Strong, I expect the child is as hungry as a bear, and I know our breakfast is getting cold," exclaimed Mrs. Strong. Then suddenly remembering the milkman sitting, an open-mouthed listener, in his wagon, they bought the milk, and went in, closing the door on him and any other curious neighbors that might be taking an undue interest in their affairs.

It was a cozy little cottage they now entered. David looked about him with wide-eyed astonishment. With the exception of an occasional cabin along the way, on cold days, this was the first house he had entered in quite two years, and he had entirely forgotten what a respectable home was like. Everything was so clean and neat, that, small as he was, his own untidy rags embarrassed him. He knew there were clean, pretty children. He had seen them along the road, and longed inexpressibly to join them at their play.

Though this was such a tiny cottage, there was the same sense of comfort about it that there was about the woman, and when they reached the kitchen, he drew a long breath of satisfaction at the combined effect of the humming tea-kettle, the purring cat beside the fire, and, best of all, the savory meal spread upon the spotless home-made table. To him it all seemed very fine, for he had long since forgotten the appointments of his own far more elegant home, though having lost no part of his inborn appreciation of such things.

"Well, Bettie, what can I do for you before I go?" asked Mr. Strong, rising hastily as his glance fell on the clock. She rose and going around to him tiptoed to reach the ear he bent toward her. He smiled when she was through whispering and said, "Why, I suppose we shall have to try it, if you have set your heart on it. You know you always get your own way, sooner or later."

"What would be the use in being a woman, if I couldn't?" she demanded saucily.

He hurried off to work and she was left with her quiet little guest, who sat down by the cat in front of the fire, while she cleared away the breakfast things with all the eagerness of a child. Next she opened the window and cleaned and aired the house, like the orderly soul that she was, the child following her silently and watching every movement with absorbed interest. This completed to her entire satisfaction, she brought a tub into the kitchen and gave Davie such a scrubbing from head to toe, that he never forgot it. Presently the smiling satisfaction of her face changed to an expression of pain, and she gave vent to a sharp exclamation as her eyes fell upon an ugly white scar, in the shape of a star, on the tender rosy flesh just below the elbow of the left arm.

"How came that there, Davie?" she inquired.

He looked at it in a vague troubled way for a moment, then shook his head. "I dunno, I forgot."

"Well, never mind," she answered as she disappeared into another room for a few minutes. Presently she returned. In her hand she carried a little night-gown, yellow with age, a keepsake made and embroidered by a loving mother's hands in the long ago, and lovingly prized for the hands that made it.

"Now, Davie," she said cheerily, "here is something I wore before I grew as large as I am now. You got up so early this morning, I thought maybe you would like to get in my bed and take a nap. While you are taking it, I will wash your clothes and get them ready for you to put on when you wake up."

Now Davie was not a bit sleepy and he much preferred watching her, but as she had suggested it, he felt that he must do as she wished, so he went with her very obediently and she put him right in the middle of the biggest, downiest, whitest bed he thought he had ever seen, which was quite probable, as he had had only passing glimpses of what could be called beds, through the windows of the houses he had passed.

As Mrs. Strong turned to go back to the kitchen he asked timidly, " Would yer mind leavin' it open so I could watch ye ? "

She looked about inquiringly, " Oh, the door ? Why, yes, of course I will leave it open," and she turned back softly to press a kiss upon the fair rosy cheek. It was the overflow of mother love in her breast toward this little waif. To him it was something strange. It made him tingle with joy, yet he felt puzzled and shy. He said never a word, however, but nestled down contentedly upon his pillow and thought how good he felt; then he did not remember anything more. When Mrs. Strong finished her work she slipped back to see how he was progressing. She expected him to be asleep, for she was one of those women who are never at a loss as to what to do with children. The motherliness within her faithful heart was so great, that, had he been the first child she had ever seen, she would have known just how to manage him. She bent over him and listened to the regular breathing, at the same time noting the perfect features, the fine hair, the rosy healthy skin, the symmetrical body. He was such a comely child, now that he was clean, and she went back to cooking dinner with as proud a step as if she had suddenly inherited a fortune.

When David awoke he could not at first decide where he was and for a time he looked about him in bewilderment, until presently he espied Mrs. Strong as she passed before the still open door. Next his eyes fell upon his pile of little clothes, all neatly washed, ironed and mended. He drew a sigh of satisfaction, for he inherently loved cleanliness. Having been taught to dress himself, he soon put on the little waist and trousers. Then he slipped into the kitchen. Mrs. Strong was setting the table and let him help her, to his evident delight.

As they worked, she encouraged him to tell her of the life in the wagon. His shyness was rapidly disappearing, when Mr. Strong came home to dinner. He stopped in the doorway smiling, then taking a chair by the side of the boy he lifted him to a seat upon his knee, saying to his wife, with an approving nod, " He'll do." She made no answer, but her beaming face was sufficient. " Now my little man," said Mr. Strong as he settled himself comfortably in his chair, " how would you like to live with us and be our boy ? "

The child looked up with pleasure on his face ; then there came vaguely across his memory a pair of dark eyes and he said, " But my mother ? "

The strong arm drew him closer and the man answered gravely :

" If we ever find your mother, you shall go to live with her, but we want you to be our little boy until we do find her."

" All right," was the prompt response.

Mrs. Strong came over and knelt beside them upon the kitchen floor. " Davie, don't you think you could call us papa and mamma ? " she asked.

" Yes'm," was his grave little answer, as he looked steadily into the longing face, " until my mother comes."

" Couldn't you call her mother and me mamma ? " was the next question.

" Oh, yes, then I'll have a mother and a mammy and a mamma ! " he said, gleefully, counting them off on his fingers.

CHAPTER VII

DAVID'S LITTLE GIRL

THE next afternoon Mrs. Strong changed her dress and came out on the front porch evidently intending to go away from home. She looked about for her little charge and found him sitting as still as a mouse behind a big cape jasmine bush.

"Why Davie, what are you doing?" she inquired. He got up and came promptly to her side, at the same time keeping an anxious eye on the street.

"I was skeered *he* was coming after me; I heard a wagon," was his answer.

"If *he* should come now, he should not have you!" she declared with a confidence she did not entirely feel.

He looked up into her face with a luminous smile spreading over his features. Little though he was, he keenly felt the joy of being wanted. "Now, I am going over to see the lady who lives next door. There came to her last night a tiny baby girl. Would you like to stay here until I come back?" she asked.

The child looked anxiously down the street and answered, "I can stay. You don't think he'll come while you are gone, do you?"

"I tell you, Davie, I believe God—God, that I taught you to say your prayers to last night—sent you to us, and I don't believe he will ever let that man come back."

The little face brightened then clouded again. "But my mother?" he suggested.

"I hope God will let us find her," Mrs. Strong replied with evident effort. After a pause she continued, "If you can be very still you may go with me over there."

"I'll be still," declared the child slipping his hand quickly into hers and trudging down the flower bordered walk by her side.

Once outside the gate he looked up and asked eagerly, "What does it look like?"

"What?" she questioned, puzzled to catch his thought.

"Why, that baby," was the sturdy reply.

"Oh," she laughed, "do you want to see it? I'll show it to you while we are there."

When they entered the darkened room, the little fellow sat down on a low stool offered him, and waited patiently to see the baby.

The two women talked as neighbor women will.

He heard their talk but they seemed to have forgotten that he wanted to see that baby. He wondered what it was like, where they kept it and what they did with it, for it so happened that he had never seen a baby.

At last Mrs. Strong catching sight of his woebegone face, exclaimed, "Why, bless the child! Come here and see the baby."

He obeyed with alacrity as she turned back the cover. He gazed at it in silent astonishment, the smiling women watching, curious to see what he would do. Finally he drew a long breath, and asked, "Wuz I ever like that?"

When assured that he was, he stood thinking soberly, until the tiny creature opened its eyes, then he clapped his hands with glee and inquired eagerly, "What yer goin' to do with it?"

"I don't know; why?" asked the mother looking proudly down at her baby daughter.

"I wisht I had it," he declared stoutly.

"Oh, you mean you wish you had one like it?" corrected Mrs. Strong in an amused tone.

"No, I want that one," he persisted.

At this the mother smiled at Mrs. Strong significantly and said, "Never mind, you be a real good boy and maybe some day I will give her to you."

"Oh, will you?" he cried; "I'll be just as good as I kin be."

"All right," said Mrs. McArthur patting his hand kindly.

"Why, la, Ann, if it ain't sundown and I haven't done a bit of my night work. I must go this very minute," declared Mrs. Strong rising as she spoke.

"Must you go?" sighed the young mother. "I am glad you came. I get so lonesome and I don't know what I should do without you, Miss Bettie. You have been like a sister to me since I married and came here. You were always a good friend to me back at home, even when I was a child."

"Well now, you are a great comfort to me, if you only knew it," declared the other, as she passed out of the door with her young charge, after promising to come again the next day; which promise filled David with even greater pleasure than it did Ann McArthur.

That night after supper David was comfortably settled on Mr. Strong's knee, when he suddenly announced,

"I've got a little girl."

"Oh, you have!" exclaimed Mr. Strong, while Mrs. Strong laughed gaily. "And pray where is she?" inquired that gentleman.

“She’s over there,” answered the boy, pointing his chubby finger in the direction of the McArthur home.

“Well now, how big is she?” questioned Mr. Strong, with the interest of a man unused to children.

“Why—why, she’s about as big as my fist,” cried the child excitedly.

The next morning he hung about Mrs. Strong, tried to help her, got in her way and puzzled her generally, until finally he asked, “When are we going to see my little girl?” She laughed merrily, but promised to go soon after dinner. It seemed to him the time would never come. These new friends could not realize how the child nature was craving the companionship of children. When Mrs. Strong went over, of course she had to tell Mrs. McArthur what Davie had said about the baby.

“Why, bless his little heart!” exclaimed that kindly woman. “Now, Miss Bettie, you must let him come over to see her every single morning if he wants to.”

So it quickly came to be an understood thing that Davie and the baby should spend a great deal of time together.

CHAPTER VIII

OF CHILDREN

SO weeks passed into months and months slipped into years. Already Mr. and Mrs. Strong had grown to wonder if they could have loved a child of their own more dearly than this little boy, whom God had sent to bless their home. He was growing into a sturdy little lad. The crowning joy to him, however, came on the bright October day, when he first started to school. With his slate, pencil and the wonderful blue-backed speller under his arm, he went timidly up to the little old unpainted schoolhouse door, where he lingered uncertain how to proceed. Presently he espied the jolly little red-faced teacher smiling and beckoning him to come in. Once there, his timidity vanished. Under the kindly direction of "Teacher," who had dearly loved small boys of his own, he was soon busy and happy.

From that hour the teacher was one of his heroes as the first teacher generally is and should be. In those early days when they worked so faithfully and under such innumerable difficulties to lay the foundation of our present splendid public school system, the pioneer teacher surely deserved the homage of those for whom he toiled.

David's time now flew swiftly. Besides "Teacher" and the lessons, there were the recesses and plenty of children with whom he could play. Then what fun it was to show the father and mother, every night, how much he had learned through the day. How they oh'ed and ah'ed over his progress, fully deciding in their own minds that he was a most wonderful little boy.

But, to all this pleasure, there was one drawback. Mona McArthur, the best playmate, was too young to go. How she fretted for "Dabie" and how she watched for his coming, clapping her hands for joy when he came in sight. How her bright eyes would sparkle and her curls bob about her restless little head, how eagerly she called him to hurry back and play with her or trudged contentedly with him to his house, as the case might be. It was hard for him to tear himself away from her and he always hurried back with unabated enthusiasm.

One afternoon he came down the street, eagerly watching for her face. Presently he espied her playing with a little new neighbor boy, on the bank of the ditch which ran between Mrs. Strong's and Mrs. McArthur's yards, cutting the broad walk in two and emptying into the river. Where it divided the walk there was a small bridge over it. On the end of this bridge, the two children sat crawfishing side by side, each with a string to which a bit of meat was attached. Presently, even as David approached them, the boy wearied of this sport and looking about for more, the spirit of mischief seized him and he pushed Mona off into the soft mud below their swinging bare feet. Instantly there was a howl of wrath from Mona, while David promptly collared the boy and shook him. "There!" he shouted, as he pushed the crying boy from him, "if you was my size I'd whip you, you little coward." But the child fled for home, not waiting to reply or hear more, while faithful David made haste to extricate Mona and carry her to her mother. He waited long enough to see her smile, then hurried home, for Mrs. Strong, though very kind, was also firm and required him to come promptly home.

He rushed in all out of breath, in his indignation to tell Mrs. Strong of Mona's mishap. He got no further than opening his mouth very wide, then he stood staring a whole minute without uttering a sound. Before him sat Mrs. Strong with a crowing baby in her arms, and another asleep on the bed beside her. At sight of his bewildered face, she could scarcely refrain from laughing, but calling him to her side, she slipped a reassuring arm about him, pushed back the soft hair from his brow with a caressing hand and said, "This morning I went to see a poor sick friend of mine, who had these two little baby girls with nobody to take care of them. She was so very sick that the doctors said she could not live but a little while. She was so distressed because she had no people and she did not know what would become of her babies. She had known me a long time and begged me to take them for my little girls. I went to see your father and we agreed that it was so pleasant to have a nice big boy in our home that we decided to take the little girls too. I went back and the lady gave them to me for my own, to be your little sisters. She died in just a little while and now these dear little babies have nobody to love or care for them but us."

"An' they are goin' to stay our very own and nobody can't take them away any mor'n they can me?" demanded David standing on first one foot then the other in an ecstasy of delight.

“No, they can’t take them away; but remember now, they are your little sisters and you will have to help us take care of them,” was the answer.

“Oh, yes’m, I’ll help, and can’t I go get Mona, and let us sit down here on the floor by you and hold um, just a tiny tony bit?” he begged excitedly.

“Yes, if you will be careful with them,” was the answer. He paused long enough to put up his soft red lips for a kiss, then flew away to find his “little girl” to share with him this new joy, just as she had always shared the old ones.

Presently they came back and settled themselves on the floor side by side. After the babies were placed snugly in their laps, the two heads bobbed sociably together as they compared the two rosy, pink-toed babies and tried to decide which was the prettier. Two pairs of eager eyes presently looked up as their owners inquired for the babies’ names.

“Why, yes, they are named,” answered Mrs. Strong smiling, “one for their mother, one for me.”

“Oh,” cooed Mona, “what’s ve names of vem?”

“They are named Maud and Bess,” was the answer.

"But which is Maud and which is Bess?" persisted David.

Mrs. Strong looked at him helplessly a moment and then laughingly said, "My son, I couldn't tell which was which to save my life."

At this juncture they looked up to find Mr. Strong standing in the doorway, smiling over their dilemma.

"Let me call mine Bess, 'cause that's your name," urged David.

"But how are you going to tell she is Bess after you put her down?" questioned Mr. Strong.

"I know," declared Mrs. Strong brightening. Then she disappeared, returning with a bit of scarlet yarn thread and a bit of blue, which she tied, one on the sleeve of each baby.

"There, the blue is for Bess and the red for Maud. When they get older we can tie it on their hair, if we cannot tell them apart any other way," she said.

It was not long, however, until it was easy to distinguish between them, as Maud's eyes grew darker and Bess became a decided blond.

Mona now spent a great deal of her time with the "twinnies," as she called them. But even if she did not come to see them before, she always came as soon as David arrived from school, because he felt his importance as caretaker of the babies, and had less time to go to Mona's.

But if he found less time for visiting her, his love for her did not diminish. He welcomed her whenever she came and always shared every pleasure with her.

At her desire, Mona's discarded baby carriage, the only one in the town, was brought over and on every fine afternoon a twin was deposited in each end of it, by Mrs. Strong. Then Mona and David amused themselves and their charges by trundling them about the yard.

CHAPTER IX

DEEPENING SHADOWS

THOUGH so young, David was a serious child and thoughtful beyond his years. Although busy with school and play, with Mona and the babies, yet there were many things happening which greatly puzzled him. He realized in his childish way, that something was going on, of serious importance to his elders. He would see Mr. and Mrs. Strong sit talking anxiously together over something that evidently troubled them. But he knew that it was not alone their trouble, for he saw the teacher and two or three of the large boys talking together in the same way. In all their talk he heard Davis, Lincoln, Sumter and many other words until they became familiar though he did not in the least understand them. When people met on the streets, he would hear them anxiously inquire, "Any news?" He could see other men talking earnestly with Mr. Strong as they went to and from town. Sometimes they came to sit with the Strongs after supper, and they always talked of the same things with the same troubled earnestness. Mr. McArthur was not one of these men, however. He never stopped to talk with his neighbors. He attended strictly to his own affairs and plainly indicated that he wished them to do the same. David often heard him mentioned in low indignant tones, and while he could not understand what they said, he realized that, for some reason, they disapproved of Mona's father.

One afternoon Mona came over as usual, and found the babies asleep, so she and David went to play under the big magnolia tree, a favorite place with them both. David was busy whittling a top from an old spool, while Mona made a playhouse beside him. She was gifted in making playhouses from any available material. The only thing absolutely necessary to her satisfaction in them was the presence of David. Her materials were unimportant; a bit of cloth, a few leaves, flowers or sticks could be combined to entertain her indefinitely. Now she was busy with some bits of broken crockery, a small rag doll and a board.

Presently she looked up and asked soberly, "Davie, what's the matter with my papa?"

"I don't know," declared Davie truthfully. "Why, Mona?"

"Well, last night, when we was eatin' our supper, he told mamma he was goin' to some place—let me see, it was Woo-rope, or somethin' like that, to stay a long time. Mamma asked him if he was goin' to take us. He looked jest as funny and said, 'Certainly not,' he couldn't be bothered with us, and then he told her he had fixed everything for us to stay right here. Mamma looked sick and white, and after papa went back to town she cried and cried, and kept sayin' over and over, 'He might a 'sulted me,' or something like that. Davie, was my papa mean to her? If I thought so I'd just hate him, 'cause mamma is so sweet and good. To-day she has had the headache all day. Her room is all dark, and Mammy Jane looks cross and says, 'hateful thing,' and won't let me go in mamma's room."

The child had stopped playing, and was looking up into David's face with her eyes all brimming with tears. The boy was filled with sudden anger at the sight of her childish grief, then he put his arm tenderly about her and said, "Never mind, little girl, it will be all right. When I get to be a man I shan't ever let anybody make you cry again." Finding this comforted her he suggested, "S'pose you climb up on the gate-post and jump off. I'll catch you and play you jumped out of a big house that was burning."

This proposition delighted her, for it was only when David wished to be especially kind that he would play this, for Mona was getting to be quite a heavy little girl and it was all he could do to stand when he caught her.

A few evenings later David heard Mr. Strong and one of the neighbors gravely discussing Mr. McArthur's departure for Europe, which had taken place that day. He was puzzled by their manner as they spoke of it, and slipped away to where Mrs. Strong was putting the twins to bed. He told her what Mona had told him a few days before. But even mamma did not enlighten him, for all she said when he had finished was, "Poor Ann, I'll go over to see her to-morrow." He went to bed more puzzled than ever. He did not like Mr. McArthur because he never noticed children, and then he had, in some way, managed to make Mrs. McArthur unhappy. But he could not understand why his elders also showed such disapproval of the man.

Things kept getting queerer and queerer, until at last his own dear papa kissed them all good-bye, and laying his hand tenderly on David's head said, "Be a good boy, my son, and take good care of mamma for me until I come back." Then he went away leaving Mrs. Strong crying with her arms about the bewildered little lad, while the babies toddled about in gleeful ignorance. Then it was that Mrs. Strong thought to explain to him about the terrible war which had begun, and why papa must go to fight the Yankees, while they stayed at home to work and pray for him.

"Is that where Mr. McArthur is gone?" asked David, when she had finished.

"No," she answered, and closed her lips tightly, so queer for mamma, but she would say no more.

CHAPTER X

WAR

IT was the night of the third of July in '63. The Confederates were camped four miles from H——. To-morrow they were going to try to take the town from the Federals, who were quite comfortably ensconced there.

It was a warm night, and the men were weary with the day's march. Many of them lay about in groups resting, as twilight came on. Four men composed one of these groups. From their appearance, one would rightly judge that chance rather than intention had thrown them together. They were talking together in low tones. Presently one, a middle-aged man, said, "It's all very well for younger fellows to look forward to war, but when a man has a family dependent upon him, it makes a difference."

"How large a family have you?" politely inquired the youngest man of the group, perhaps for the want of something else to say.

"I have a wife and three children, but the children are adopted. About seven years ago, we found a little boy on our door-steps, early one morning. He was a handsome little chap with big gray eyes and dark hair. There was a star-shaped scar on his left arm, just below the elbow, evidently from a burn." All three of his listeners drew eagerly forward, but the narrator was so intent upon his story that he did not notice it.

"He did not know anything about the scar nor about his people, except that his father was called 'Marse David' by somebody, and that his father was dead."

The two young men looked at each other quickly, while the fourth man eyed them keenly.

"He talked," continued the speaker, "about a man in a wagon coming back for him and a woman with him, the little chap called 'mammy.' I tried to find his folks for awhile, but I didn't succeed, and now I am glad of it, for he is as fine a little fellow as the country affords. Some time afterwards we adopted two little girls. So we have a pretty good family of other people's children. I don't know how my wife would take care of them, if anything was to happen to me, that is, until Davie gets old enough to help. Even then it would be a pretty sharp scuffle."

The youngest man of the group, scarcely grown, said something about the kindness of the speaker in taking care of so many orphans, and evidently wanted to say something more when the other young man interrupted him, gruffly, saying,

"I expect it's time we were asleep, Dick," whereupon they rose and walked away.

When out of earshot of the others, the younger said, chokingly, "John, that man is taking care of our brother. If anything happens to him, the child will be reduced to abject poverty, when he has a right to be the richest man in our county."

"Well, what of it? Don't you suppose I have sense enough to understand that? I am glad he has been comfortable so far," was the snarling answer of the low-browed elder brother.

"John, the thing we've done is all wrong," declared Richard sharply.

"It's done at all events, and it's too late now to right it," was the positive reply.

The two men left sitting on the grass silently watched them disappear in the gathering twilight, then the one who had so far remained silent, leaned over and said,

"Good-lookin' young chaps,—look like they might be uster good livin', shore."

"Yes," was the slow rejoinder, "that youngest one reminds me some of our Davie."

The other man started slightly and ejaculated, "Is that so? Well, mister, we are goin' into a battle to-morrow, and we mought not both come out alive. You don't know who I am, and I don't guess it matters much, but I was the man in the wagon that never come back, and them two fellers yonder is the ones that hired me to take Davie off."

His listener stared into the dark face beside him in silent amazement.

"It's a fact, whether you believe it or not," assented the other as he rose and shuffled off in the gathering gloom.

That night four men lay awake making plans concerning little David, and thinking of the chance meeting of that evening. Mr. Strong's thoughts were sad, yet mingled with a satisfaction in thinking of the possibility of restoring him to a heart-broken mother, if she were still living.

"The man who drove the wagon" was planning to sell his knowledge of the child's whereabouts to the highest bidder. Richard fell asleep in one of his abject fits of remorse, with one of his firm resolutions to see the stranger to-morrow, and find out the present home of his little brother, and when the war was over to restore the child to the long-suffering mother.

John knew Richard so well, that he did not have to question the latter to know of his remorse and resolutions. But he also knew that he could keep Richard close to him until his fit of despondency was past, and so prevent his seeking for the troublesome little brother who would not remain lost.

With the morning came hasty preparations for the battle. The hurried march, the prompt battle, the defeat of the Confederates have all been told in history and we will not dwell upon them here.

As they retreated, Richard found beside him the body of his brother John, and a little farther on he came to that of the stranger who had told of the "Little Davie" in his home. Near him lay the slouchy dark man, who had silently listened to the story with them and eyed each one in turn with his furtive, beady eyes. He, also, was apparently dead. About his ragged, unkempt hair and beard, soiled face and clothing, but most of all those cunning little eyes, there was something puzzlingly familiar, yet Richard could not place him. He did not dwell long on the subject, however, for his troubled thoughts were taken up with the death of his older brother and of the stranger from whom he was to have gained such valuable information concerning the younger one. He made some effort to learn the man's name and the town whence he came, but he found it difficult, and as most of his resolutions were of short duration, this passed in the excitement of the hour and his opportunity was lost.

After the retreat of the Confederates, the Federals found among their wounded, who were supposed to be dead, this same dark, unkempt man groaning in great suffering. He was carried by them to the hospital at Preston House, which they had seized and were now using for that purpose.

The man lay for some time totally unconscious, but by and by he recovered consciousness and made a dazed effort to take in something of his surroundings. How long he lay there he did not know. He could not move anything except his eyes, and these found little to see, beyond the lofty ceiling, the upper part of the large windows and, most interesting of all, a man's portrait. This last hung upon the wall just opposite and his eyes rested upon it without effort. It seemed the only real thing near him. He was dimly aware that there were other sufferers in the room. But it seemed to his dazed brain that everybody in the whole world was suffering intolerably, with the exception of the man in the portrait. He alone was at peace. His broad white forehead was smooth, his gray eyes looked away over the wounded man's head, as though in deep study. The dark hair looked fine and abundant, even in the picture.

Then for a time he lost consciousness, even of his intense suffering. When he came to himself again, a woman stood beside him. Her cool, firm hand rested for a moment upon his burning forehead. He looked up into a face that was comparatively colorless, but for the two straight red lips that were closed firmly together. She was by no means an old woman. Her figure was trim and stately, her skin was fresh and smooth, yet the soft, waving hair, parted and drawn smoothly into a knot back of her neck, was as white as it is possible for human air to become. Out of this white face and from beneath this crown of white hair, glowed a pair of large dark eyes, that were wonderfully kind, yet back of their kindness was a certain restless eagerness that made him know, sick and suffering though he was, that she had long been watching for some one. He gazed at her wonderingly for a moment, then his eyes again sought the portrait. Presently he whispered, "Where am I?"

"You are in the hospital," she replied, as she began to bathe his face.

"Yanks?" was the next feeble inquiry.

"Yes, it is a Yankee hospital," was her slow answer.

He wondered what she was doing there but did not ask.

Presently his eyes went back to the portrait and he whispered,

"Who is he?"

"That is my husband," she replied as her skilful fingers began to dress the wound in his shoulder. She continued talking as she worked, he thought at first to divert his mind, but presently he saw there was another reason.

"This is my home. The Yankees seized it for a hospital. I had already sent my family away, so I begged them to let me stay and help with the nursing.

"Nine years ago, I had a little three year old boy to disappear and we never could find him. I thought if I stayed here, I might find some one who knew something of him. He resembled his father very much and their names were the same, David Preston. We called the child Davie. On his left arm below the elbow, was a star-shaped scar, from a burn. Have you ever heard of him ?" She told her story in a slow measured voice, and at the end asked the question patiently as she worked, and he knew, as he drifted out again upon the wide sea of insensibility, that she had told it often before, and would probably tell it to every soldier whom she met, in the faint hope of getting news.

When he awoke again he could feel nothing, and there was a strange sense of lightness about his body. He looked about vaguely, getting his bearings from the portrait again.

He suddenly remembered the woman and what she had said. He turned his eyes in her direction, but she was gone and a gray haired negro man, sitting where she had been, was gravely waving a large turkey-wing fan over him. His hair was not nearly so white as the woman's, but in the kindly old face were the unmistakable furrows of approaching age.

"Where is the lady ?" asked the sufferer feebly.

"Mistiss ? She done gone to lay down an' res' a while. She tole me to take keer on you tell the doctor got to you."

"I tried to tell her but I couldn't," gasped the wounded man. "Her little boy—a young feller named John Preston come hired me to—I wuz passin' through here—he come and promised to pay me to take him off. After awhile—a young feller named Dick somethin' or other—I think they wuz brothers—he come and fetched the little chap asleep. He cried an' said his pa was a dyin'." He paused and the old negro leaned eagerly over him. Presently he went on again, "The other one sent me money every once in a while, then—he quit and I left the little feller on a man's steps in—in—tell her in ——"

But the sentence was never finished in this world. The man had gone with his message into the unknown.

Old Bill sat for a time in dumb bitter disappointment. He had come so close to happiness for his mistiss, and then to fail!

At last he said to himself, "Well, arter all, he didn't tell me whar to fine him. Now ought I to tell my pore little missie or not? Hit shorely wouldn't help her none. So hit was Marse John that sent his little brother off. I hain't much surprised at that, but I shorely didn't tink Marse Dick would 'a' done it, I shorely didn't. He wouldn't nuther if Marse John hadn't made him do it."

The old man sat and shook his head thoughtfully. After awhile he began again, "I dunno whether to tell missie or not." He pondered long by the dead man's side. After a time he rose shaking his head again. "He said tell her, but he didn't say what to tell, an' hit would jest worry her and not do a mite of good 'thout I knew whar he was, an' what to tell her. No, siree, bob, I shan't say a word."

CHAPTER XI

THE MAN OF THE HOUSE

WHILE Mrs. McArthur was drooping under her concealed troubles, cheery busy Mrs. Strong could not take time for worry, because she must keep the wolf from the door. She wondered more than once, what she would have done without the manly little David. How many steps his ready young feet saved her, none but she ever knew. When she was reluctant to let him take so much upon his young shoulders he would always say, "Oh, but you know I have to take papa's place now," after which he went sturdily on with his self-imposed task. Had they not been so busy, time would have dragged with this and many another brave woman, for what is so wearying as waiting?

There came news of a battle here, danger there, then for a time no news at all. By and by there came a dark day, when it was rumored that Mr. Strong had been killed. A day or two later the news was confirmed. He had fallen at the battle of H—— on the fourth of July. When this blow came, brave Bettie Strong bowed beneath it for a time, but when a kindly well-meaning neighbor came in to suggest that some other provision would have to be made for the children, as she could not possibly care for them longer, she roused fiercely and answered, "I am going to take care of them myself. They are all I have left and no one but God shall take them from me." She wept bitterly when she found she must take Davie from the little school, but he comforted her by saying, "Never mind, mamma, you can teach me after supper every night."

After some difficulty she got him a place as office and errand boy. He was, she judged, about twelve years old now. All day he ran errands and she sewed, but after supper they settled themselves with his books and her knitting. She did all in her power to render the lessons helpful and attractive, though many times her eyes ached and she longed to rest. David received valuable training in the office in his studies, but most of all in the solid lessons of virtue and piety that were to mold his character for all time to come.

Mrs. Strong's religion was decidedly practical. It grieved her that there was so little religious worship in the town. At irregular intervals a preacher would pass through, stopping over to preach two or three sermons, but during the rest of the time they were without services.

There were no Sabbath-schools or prayer-meetings, and this she felt she must remedy. After much anxiety, thought and earnest prayer, she decided to invite her neighbors to her house on the Sunday forenoons in which there was no preaching, to have prayer-meetings. On Sabbath afternoons she gathered in all the children she could and gave them somewhat of Sunday-school by teaching them Bible stories. Of course her own children received the benefit of both of these services, as well as all other children who cared to come.

David was especially fond of the Bible stories, and of them all, the story of Daniel was his favorite. He always begged for it when it was his time to choose the story; and the passage, " But Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself," became somewhat of a motto to the thoughtful growing boy. He kept the thought of finding his mother, when he became a man, always before him. When he found her, she must be proud of him. He, like Daniel, would not defile himself. Some of his ideas of defilement might have been amusing to his elders, but he had his own standard and strove manfully to live up to it.

With the coming of spring they managed to find the time to make a garden, which not only supplied their table but also gave them some vegetables to sell to more prosperous neighbors. It seemed to Mrs. Strong that chickens never did so well. From their little income she managed to save enough to buy a cow, which not only supplied them bountifully with milk and butter, but gave some surplus to sell. She never knew that kind-hearted Ann McArthur did not have a garden that spring, in order that she might buy vegetables of these hard-working friends; or that she ate up all of her own chickens, so she could buy those of the widow and orphans.

David's greatest privation, of which he said nothing, was seeing so little of Mona. He was usually cleaning up the office in the mornings before she was awake. He had no time at noon or night. But the Sabbath was always their day together. When there was preaching at the little schoolhouse, they went early and sat side by side between their mothers, and then all came home to Mrs. McArthur's for dinner, where the children played until time for the little Sabbath-school.

Though so busy, Mrs. Strong tried hard to keep life from being all work for her growing, restless children. In the garden was always planted a long row of pop-corn and one of ribbon-cane for their special pleasure. When the cane was ripe, Mona was called over every afternoon after David got home from the office, and all four children ranged themselves in a comfortable row on the back fence and chattered like so many blackbirds, while David peeled and cut up the long, smooth stalks of liquid sweetness into suitable lengths for chewing. At first Mrs. Strong feared that the quantity they ate would make them sick, but finding it did not, she rejoiced at their pleasure and left them to enjoy it to their hearts' content.

Then they had their two small banana trees, and several orange trees, which supplied them a moderate amount of those luscious fruits, the first eaten when ripe, the latter gathered late in the fall and stored, with the pop-corn, for Christmas and the remainder of the winter.

When the winter came, Mona was there, for whenever the evening was cold enough to have a fire, lessons were laid aside; the big pot was put on a roaring fire, a goodly lump of butter, with plenty of salt, was put into the pot with the pop-corn which they had shelled, and all took turns at stirring, as one could not long stand the heat. When it was done a big paper was spread on the rug and the snowy feast was emptied in a great pile thereon. How they all enjoyed these frolics! Sometimes they made molasses candy, pulling some and making pop-corn balls with the rest, the corn being popped without the salt and butter for this purpose.

Usually Mrs. Strong's contribution to the fun was to tell them stories of her girlhood, as she sat with her ever-present knitting.

Sometimes she left them to entertain themselves with their own nonsense, while she listened, learning more than they dreamed from their language, plans and accounts of the day's happenings, about her own management and training of them.

One night they were thus occupied planning, between mouthfuls of pop-corn, what they would do when they were grown. Bess declared she would have a big house and ten children to cook and sew for, then she would have plenty to do and lots of company. Maud sniffed contemptuously. "I am not going to get married," she declared. "I am going to make lots of money and go round the world like the man mamma was reading about."

"When I get grown, I am going to marry the prettiest girl I know," said David as he sat admiring the glow of the firelight upon Mona's red hair, brown eyes and freckles, all of the same shade, and all beautiful to him.

Now at school, a few days before, Mona had been told how very homely red hair and freckles were, so the mention of beauty roused her quick temper and she cried hotly, "When I get grown I am going to marry a rich man with a big fine house."

David was not discomfited by her requirements, for, of course, if she wanted anything he would get it for her; but why was she angry about it? He puzzled over this silently until she cast more than one sidelong glance to see if she had offended him. It was always his way to be quiet when she became vexed. He was calm, even in anger, while she was at times a very little spitfire. But he loved her none the less for her hasty tongue and hot temper.

Those were lonely days for Ann McArthur. Secretly she would have been glad to share her home with Mrs. Strong and the orphans, to save her friend so much hard work, and because they would have been a great comfort to her in her loneliness and failing health. This was out of the question, however; first, because Mrs. Strong would not have accepted so much, and, again, because she knew her husband would object very seriously to such proceedings. But if she could not take care of them entirely, there were numberless ways of helping them and she never lost an opportunity to do so. It seemed to Mrs. Strong that Ann was very foolish not to make Mona's dresses longer, for she always outgrew them while they were perfectly good, when they were invariably given to the twins. Besides all the other help, she had Mrs. Strong do all of her sewing. So they got on quite comfortably together and the children were as happy as four little birds. Mrs. Strong was quite contented and spent little time in useless grief. But in Mrs. McArthur's eyes there lay a shadow that had come to remain, though she never spoke of her trouble, even to Mrs. Strong.

When the war closed, all of Mrs. McArthur's slaves left but two. Mammy and her son, Jeff, flatly refused to go with the rest, so Mrs. McArthur gratefully employed them, and her household moved on as before.

When the time for her husband's return drew near, she faced the event with dread. She was a loving, impulsive, warm-hearted woman. She had at first taken his calm indifference for depth, but ever since her marriage she had realized more and more that his marriage had simply been one of Donald McArthur's financial moves. True, he had done well with her property, had kept her in ease and comfort, and showed plainly that he felt that he had therefore been a good husband. Her affection irritated him. When Mona came he was glad for her to lavish her caresses on the child and leave him alone. He was vexed when he found that Mona had inherited her mother's intensity, but he left them to enjoy each other and went tranquilly on his way.

When he went away and left her, so indifferently, at the beginning of the war, it hurt her cruelly, but it was the death-blow to her affection for him. It was as if she had wakened to the fact that she had married another man from the one she had intended marrying. She had a certain sense of pity for him that he was so incapable of affection, but she had ceased to care particularly for him and dreaded having him come back to her. If he could have gone on living away she would have been glad. As long as she loved him, she could be patient with his fault-finding and even his indifference, though they hurt her more. Now that she did not care, she dreaded him as something of a master to whom she must render an account. She was a woman to whom love was everything. Had he but loved her she could have borne poverty and toil, have reared him a large family in health and happiness, but when her love died, her health failed and she would have faded quickly but for her child. Her intense love for Mona made her cling to life, even though it was the life of an invalid.

Mr. McArthur arrived early one forenoon, but did not come home until dark. He spent the day in town going over his business, only sending word of his arrival. When he reached home, Mona ran to meet him, but his wife remaining in the house gave him a very quiet reception. He was equally surprised and relieved at her lack of demonstration. To him it indicated that she had at last ceased to be a child, who expected petting and presents.

Supper was not over before he said half petulantly, "A pretty mess you would have made of things if it had not been for Flint. I tell you he is a promising young man. It's a good thing I came back when I did. Business was getting pretty tangled."

She made no reply, but sat with tightly compressed lips. He waited a moment, then looked up with a quick surprised movement and asked, "What were you about to say?"

"Nothing," she answered; "but I was thinking, it is well that you have come, and it might have been better if you had not gone away at all."

She saw the gleam of triumph that came into his eyes, as he answered coolly, "I think perhaps I am the best judge of that."

She bit her lip with vexation. She realized that he had made her do the thing that he intended her to do, given him an opportunity for a cutting reply.

It shocked her to find how she had grown away from this man. He finished his supper in silence and left, without a word, for town.

She was not more surprised at herself than he was to find her so quiet and self-contained. He did not enjoy it as much as he had thought he would. It gave him a vague sense of uneasiness. He liked to keep his own counsel, but he wanted her to talk, to tell him all she knew, as she had in her early married life.

When she talked he found out what she and others thought, all of which he liked to know. Then if he was vexed, he knew better how to vent his ill humor by worrying her. Now that she had grown quiet, it gave her a new strength and dignity.

He could not discover her vulnerable point so readily. Decidedly he did not like this change in her, though he had failed to notice her failing health.

CHAPTER XII

CLIMBING

ONE sunny afternoon in May, Mrs. McArthur went visiting, mammy went to town, and when Mona came home from school, she found no one at home. She played a little while indoors, but soon grew lonely. The house seemed so strange and quiet when mamma was away. She decided to go out into the garden. The big jasmine bushes were great fragrant bouquets of large velvety blossoms and glossy dark leaves, the orange trees were covered with small green fruit, and scattered everywhere were masses of roses and geraniums. It was a beautiful flower garden, and to Mona an ever varying delight. She never wearied of color, vivid brilliant color, and the garden satisfied her longer than the stillness of the house. But even this did not last. She had been sitting in school all day and now her whole restless body called for action. She looked down at the little boat tied on the river bank below the house. "Oh, if Davie were here we could have such a fine boat ride," she thought wistfully. She knew that she must not attempt to go alone, so, with a single look down the inviting river, she turned resolutely away, because that was forbidden unless Davie could accompany her. Presently she espied the big sweet-gum tree at the end of the house. She could not remember the time it had not invited her to its cool depths. She had always intended to climb to the very top of it, some day. Why not do so now? There was nobody here to forbid it, and it had never been forbidden.

She had been looking on the map of a "jogaphy" to-day, and was surprised to find such a tiny space between them and the Gulf. It occurred to her that if she climbed that tree she might possibly see the Gulf.

She had no difficulty in climbing as high as she liked. She was disappointed in not seeing the Gulf, but decided that it was because there were so many tall trees between. Her disappointment was speedily swallowed up in delight at what she did see. The river wound in and out through the luxuriant forest like a shimmering ribbon fringed with palmettos, beneath the gigantic shade trees that were not sufficiently clothed with their own foliage but must needs be draped in trailing vines and long Spanish moss, while beneath all this, wherever the palmettos had not taken possession, was a bewildering mass of undergrowth of all the varying shades of green imaginable. By simply turning her head, she could look up the dusty street, running back of their house, past the court-house surrounded by the village stores, and on to the seemingly interminable forest beyond. She could see all the passers-by, some hurrying on their way to town, others taking a leisurely stroll down the river walk. It filled this warm-hearted child of the South with a sense of longing to share her pleasure with some one. Oh—if mamma or Davie would only come so she could talk to them about it! Presently she felt she could bear it no longer, and started to go down in search of companionship, but it seemed such a long way from limb to limb that she grew frightened and dared go no farther, but sat on a big limb with one arm around the tree. She waited until she was thoroughly tired, then she saw, not her mother, but her father entering the gate.

"Oh, papa," she called tremulously, "won't you please help me down?"

"Where are you?" he demanded, looking perplexedly in every direction but the right one.

"I'm up in the big sweet-gum tree," came the eager answer.

Instantly Mr. McArthur's face became stern and forbidding. "What in the world do you mean by climbing that tree? What kind of raising is your mother giving you? No, I shall not help you down. You may get down the best way you can, as a punishment for getting up there. You knew better than to climb that tree in the first place." After these harsh words he went into the house. Presently he came out with a handful of papers. Without so much as a glance in her direction he called curtly, "Where is your mother?"

"I don't know, sir," Mona answered in a firm little voice from which all pleading had gone. He could not see her flashing eyes and hot, rebellious face as he went out the gate, or he would certainly have wanted to add to her punishment, for if there was one thing that Donald McArthur could not tolerate it was rebellion. He cared very little about dealing with people over whom he had no authority, but wherever he had the authority, he ruled with an iron hand. He passed on down the street, she watching him with clenched hands. After he had passed out of sight she said to herself, "The idea of his talking that way about my mamma. She is heaps and heaps better than he is. I am glad I climbed the old tree anyhow, just 'cause he don't like it."

It seemed a long time before any one else came. She could not imagine why her mother stayed so late. If her father had not made her so angry, she would have cried before this, but now her face burned and her throat ached until she felt as if she must choke. By and by she espied a schoolmate, Harry Saunders, coming up the street, and things took on a more cheerful aspect. True, Harry was a great tease, but perhaps he would help her and she, at least, wouldn't be so lonesome. It was quite a subdued voice that called, "Oh, Harry, won't you please help me down?" He looked about curiously, and she hastily called, "I'm up in the big sweet-gum tree and I can't get down."

"Oh, that you, Mona?" Then he pointed his finger at her, laughed and called derisively, "Oh, Miss Tomboy, got up in a tree and afraid to come down! Tomboy, afraid, afraid!"

Again her anger rose as her tormentor came close beneath the tree. She gathered a handful of prickly balls swinging all about her and flung them at him with all her strength. She would have hit him full in the face, but he dodged and his derision increased.

In the midst of this David appeared around the corner on his way home from work. He heard the commotion before he got in sight and gathered from the language of Mona's tormentor what was the matter. Though a year or two younger, Harry was larger than David, but the latter was upon him in an instant.

"Coward!" he hissed between his teeth, "to torment a little girl that way." Then nothing more was said until the battle was over. David let Harry up and watched him go away limp and dejected. When he had gotten his breath he called out, after the manner of his kind, "Whenever you want some more, just bother her and I'll give it to you!"

Harry turned and snarled some reply, but hastened on down the street. Mona who had watched them eagerly, almost losing her balance in the excitement, now called out to her valiant knight, "Oh, Davie, you'll help me down, won't you?"

"'Course I will," came the cheerful answer, and he was over the fence and up the tree in a twinkling. When he stood upon the limb just below and put his arm around her, she turned from the tree and flung both arms around his neck. "Oh, Davie," she sobbed with her head on his shoulder, "I never was so glad to see you in all my life!"

"Is that so?" he inquired with a cheerful grin. He could easily keep her from falling, and finding the situation quite pleasant, he stood patiently with one arm around the tree and one around her until she had had a good cry. When she suggested it, he helped her from limb to limb until they reached the lowest, then he dropped lightly to the ground and called, "Now, Mona, you jump and I'll catch you." This done to his satisfaction, he went over and sat on the steps with her, rather hoping she needed more comforting. They talked and laughed until all traces of her recent troubles had vanished.

Presently she glanced at him with her sharp eyes and cried, "Why, Davie, haven't you been shaving?"

"Yes," he answered sheepishly, his face turning crimson at the confession.

As he said this, she looked at him soberly, edged away from him a trifle, then said, in a slow, reluctant tone, "Davie, I love you as good as ever and I'm so much obliged to you for getting me out of the tree; but, Davie, I didn't know you were so big—you see you are not truly any kin to me, and—and—I am not going to kiss you any more, 'cause I don't think it would be ladylike, do you?"

He looked at her thoughtfully a moment, then with the barest glance in the direction of the sweet-gum tree, there came a slight twinkle in his eyes, but he laid his hand softly on the ruddy curls as he rose, saying, "All right, little girl;" after which he went home to his supper.

Mona sat quite still until presently her mother came. As they went into the house together, the little girl inquired, "Davie is a funny boy, isn't he, mamma?"

"Why, I suppose so,—most of them are," answered Mrs. McArthur absently.

The keen-eyed child, seeing that her mother was not in a humor to talk with her, gave up her intention of telling about the afternoon's happenings. Mr. McArthur forgot all about it, so nothing more was said.

While mammy was washing the supper dishes, Mona sidled into the kitchen and perched upon a little stool kept there for her especial use, by mammy.

"Mammy, do you think it's bad to climb trees?"

Mammy looked about cautiously, then she

chuckled, “Why, law, honey, your ma uster climb ’em all the time. I remember one time she clomb a big tree an’ I had to go up and fetch her down, but that was out in the kentry. I don’t much ’spec she’d a clomb ’em ef we had a lived in town. Your ma was a heap like you, honey, when she was little. She was mighty peart an’ frisky like.”

Mona edged up closer. “Tell me about when mamma was little,” she begged.

Mammy laughed a low laugh and began one of her tales, of which Mona never tired.

When she was through, Mona slipped up and patted the black arm, saying yearningly, “I love you, mammy.”

“Bress your little heart, honey!” cried mammy, gathering the child into her ample embrace and planting a resounding kiss upon the rosy cheeks, “your mammy sho’ tinks a sight o’ you.”

After supper David sat out on the front steps, while Mrs. Strong and the little girls were clearing away the dishes. He looked over into the McArthurs’ brightly lighted dining-room at Mona, who was eating her supper, and said to himself, “So she won’t kiss me any more.” Then his face took on a look of purpose and he went on, "Some day when I am a man and she is a woman, I'll marry her. Then I can kiss her as often as I like, and she won't feel like it's unladylike." After making which declaration to himself, he smiled a queer little smile.

Presently he heard Mrs. Strong say to one of the little girls, "I'd do it for Davie if I were you. He is such a good brother to you. I don't know what we would ever do without him."

The face he turned towards the McArthurs', after hearing that, was a very sober one, as he said to himself, "I wonder what Davie would have done without mamma for all these years." After these sobering thoughts he went in and began earnestly to work on his lessons.

CHAPTER XIII

A TURNING POINT

THROUGH Mrs. Strong's faithful work the Sabbath-school and prayer-meeting had long since outgrown the neighborhood and had been moved to the rude little schoolhouse. Through her efforts also there was preaching almost every Sunday forenoon at the schoolhouse, so the prayer-meeting had been changed to Wednesday night.

Since David and the twins had been old enough to accompany her, Mrs. Strong had insisted on their regular attendance upon these services with her. She had tried hard to get Mrs. McArthur, with Mona, to accompany her to the prayer-meeting, knowing her friend had need, in her sorrowful life, of all the comfort that religion gives. But Mrs. McArthur was not a religious woman. To her religion only meant added weight to her already grief burdened heart. She made first one excuse, then another, for not going until Mrs. Strong ceased to urge it upon her.

True Mrs. McArthur usually attended the eleven o'clock Sunday service, when there was one, and

Mona continued to accompany David to the Sabbath-school, but with them both, this was rather from habit and a sense of respectability than any desire to worship.

One Wednesday evening Mrs. Strong was preparing, as usual, to go to prayer-meeting, when David looked up and said, " Mamma, it has been raining and the walks are rather muddy. It looks to me like it would be more comfortable to stay at home."

She looked at him with a thoughtful smile and answered softly, " My son, I profess to be a follower of Christ. I know that he did not consider his own comfort when he died on the cross for your sins and mine, and we surely ought not to consider such a little discomfort as the mud from a shower, when his service calls us. If some one were sick or sad and I could help him by staying away, then it would be all right for me not to go; but to-night, I am sure I can help more by going, because there will probably be few there, and it might encourage them to have us come."

" All right," he said with evident reluctance, and a longing glance at his new " Prescott's Conquest of Mexico," which they had been reading aloud together.

She saw the glance, but thought it wiser to say no more.

David was unusually quiet that night. What Mrs. Strong had said about Christ not considering his own comfort when dying for the sins of David Strong had somehow impressed him with more force than anything of the kind had ever done before. He had been taught ever since he could understand, that Christ died to save the world, but he had never before applied it to himself. On the contrary, he considered himself a very good boy and was altogether quite well satisfied with himself. He tried to do right every day, but to-night his life did not look so satisfactory as it had heretofore.

He could look back upon a number of times when he had failed miserably; besides, he must have done wrong, or Christ would not have found it necessary to die for him. His sins did not seem so great as the sins of some people, yet they must be great enough to condemn him, for he had been taught that nothing short of perfection could satisfy God, and as no one had perfection, Christ's perfection could supply his lack of it and satisfy God's demands.

Of course, he had been taught all this, but it had never before taken personal hold upon him. He had not thought of it except as applied to the world in general, but to-night the question had narrowed itself down to Christ and himself, and he knew that he must make a decision for or against Christ, before he could satisfy his own heart. His life suddenly seemed all wrong. He felt vexed that Mrs. Strong had roused him to think of this, and he strode moodily along by her side. He could think of so little real good that he had ever done. True he tried to be a dutiful son to her, but how much more he owed her than he could ever repay! He had grown tired of hearing about gratitude to God, but somehow that had all taken a different aspect, and he suddenly despised himself.

Next came the crowning thought, if he were to die to-night, Christ's death could not help him, because he had not accepted the Son of God as his Saviour. At this thought a groan almost escaped him.

Mrs. Strong cast anxious glances at his downcast head, as she chatted with the little girls on the way to prayer-meeting. Had she made a mistake in insisting upon coming to-night, against his wishes? David was quite a big boy, taller than she, and beginning to look forward to manhood. She knew she could not long continue to control him as a

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child. Day by day she found it necessary to consult his wishes more than formerly. By insisting on coming to prayer-meeting against his wishes she might drive him away from religion, instead of drawing him to it as she had so hoped to do. So she fell into silent prayer, leaving the little girls to entertain each other.

She went into the meeting with a heavy prayerful heart, and the cry she sent up to God was,

" Oh, Lord, make my boy a Christian."

There were few at the meeting, but it was a very spiritual one. Mrs. Strong felt greatly comforted. At the close, the leader, a saintly, white-haired old man, rose with shining eyes and said: " Brethren and sisters, it is good to be here." Mrs. Strong cast an anxious glance in David's direction, but he was looking out of the window. She did not know it was with tear-dimmed, unseeing eyes.

The speaker went on: " We don't usually give this invitation, but somehow I feel impressed to ask, if there are any here with hearts heavy because of their sins, who wish God's children to pray for them, that they will tell us of it."

There was intense silence for a moment, then David slowly rose for an instant and sat down again without a word.

Mrs. Strong's heart gave a great throb of joy. She had not made a mistake after all. All the way home she and David were both silent. As soon as they reached home, David started to his room. As he passed her, Mrs. Strong gave his hand a gentle pressure. He understood her eager sympathy, and bending over her chair, he reverently kissed her.

Once in his room, he moved restlessly about for a few moments, then went out again into the night. It was dark, except for the stars, and they seemed such a long way off, almost as far as God. David flung himself down upon the tender spring grass, strewn with fallen orange blossoms. The dark fragrant stillness seemed to close down over him like the mighty hand of his Maker. He was nothing but a poor weak foolish child struggling against a loving father in a blind way, yet not knowing how to do otherwise. He sat up and leaned his hot weary head against the cool gate-post. It was the one from which Mona used to jump into his arms, and it brought, with its cooling surface, thoughts of her. With these thoughts came new temptation. He felt that he was about to cross into a new country. But what about his little girl? She did not care about being a Christian. Must he leave her behind and go forth alone to serve God? If he did, here their ways must begin to part. Instantly his conscience declared, "Thou shalt have no other gods before me." With this the darkness grew deeper within than without, and the boy, filled with a strange horror of himself prayed, prayed with all his strength that God would take him and use him for his own glory.

"Whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life." As he thought of this, the belief on the Lord Jesus Christ filled him, and with this belief came peace and joy. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob was his God, and Jesus Christ was his Saviour. He stole in and knelt at Mrs. Strong's bedside and said softly:

"Mamma, it is all right."

She laid her hand on his bowed head with a cry of joy, then said earnestly, "May God bless and use you for his glory, my son."

Far away upon the western banks of the Mississippi River a white-haired woman knelt and prayed:

"Oh, God, wherever my boy is to-night, watch over and protect him, and oh, loving Father, make him thine for Christ's sake."

CHAPTER XIV

A WAGER AND A SECRET

AT fifteen, Mona McArthur promised to develop into quite a beauty. The dozen or so pale freckles which were across her nose in childhood had disappeared. Her hair, a dark but unquestioned red, shimmered and gleamed in the sunlight like burnished metal. Her eyes exactly matched her hair in color, warm luminous brown eyes that danced or softened with every passing thought. Her skin was of that beautiful transparent texture, seldom seen in any other type and not frequent with this. She was not tall but her slender figure was as supple as a willow wand. Though popular with both the boys and girls of her set, always bubbling over with fun and exuberant life, yet about her there was a certain reserve. She never grew confidential with any one but David. Had he gone more with her set, he would doubtless have kept her out of a good deal of mischief, but she and David found that their opportunities for quiet chats came seldomer as they grew older, for David was quite poor, and though this did not in the least affect their friendship, David had little time for the pleasures of youth, while Mona was left a great deal to her own devices. Her father was wrapped up in business, while her mother had become such an invalid that for days at a time she could not be disturbed. Though having a host of friends, Mona never cared to show any of them her inmost thoughts. She inherited a certain amount of her father's secretiveness along with her mother's warmth and tenderness. Her friends all liked to confide in her because she could keep their secrets as well as her own. They often laughingly complained that Mona could entertain a crowd indefinitely with her nonsense, yet never tell them anything worth knowing, when she did not wish to.

One afternoon she and a dozen or more of her mates were returning from a boat ride. As they neared home the conversation turned upon David.

"Poor old chap!" said one of the boys, "he wants to go to school pretty bad. I wish he had the chance of some of us fellows who don't appreciate it."

"Well, whether he gets an education or not, he is a square fellow."

"I don't like these pious folks, as a rule, but if they were all like David, I'd like to be one."

"I don't believe he would tell a fib for anybody," remarked one of the girls.

"Oh, he'd do it for Mona," lazily declared Harry Saunders.

"No he wouldn't, would he, Mona?" questioned Max Oliver looking at her indignantly. But Mona was looking at Harry, who never let an opportunity pass to worry her, although he had good-naturedly forgotten the combat under the sweet-gum tree. She could not bear for Harry to have the best of her so she answered quite indifferently,

"Oh, yes, I think he would tell a story for me, if I were to ask him to."

"Oh, get out, I bet he wouldn't!" retorted Max stoutly.

"What'll you bet?" she demanded, facing around saucily.

"Anything you like," declared Max gaily, "since I'm sure to win."

"All right, we'll see. I'll wager you a plate of the best candy I can make, that he will tell a story for me, if I ask him. We will go right up town as soon as we fasten the boats, and meet him as he comes home to supper."

"All right, I'll bet you a pound of the best candy

I can get in town that he won't do it, and we'll all go and see you try," was the sturdy answer.

They made short work of tying the boats, then the gay party scrambled up the bank and were off to find David. They did not go far before they met him.

"Oh, Davie," began Mona, stopping eagerly in front of the rest, "I want you to do me a favor. The crowd are going for a moonlight boat ride to-night, and I know mamma won't let me go with them, so I want you to go by and tell her that I am going to spend the evening at Daisy Oliver's, and she and Max will bring me home at bedtime." She looked up with eager, flushed face, and urged her cause so confidently that he hated to refuse her.

"Why, Mona," he said desperately, "do you want me to tell your mother a lie?"

"Oh, Davie, just this once! I never will ask you again if you will do it this time," she urged. She was looking at him keenly for some sign of yielding, but she saw his face turn pale and his eyes darken with pain as he said huskily:

"Little girl ——" Instantly she caught his arm between her hands and cried sharply:

"Oh, Davie, don't, don't! It is all a silly joke. Max bet me you wouldn't tell a story for me, and

I bet him you would. We are not going at all. I would rather lose my wager than have you look like that."

David's lips stiffened perceptibly, then changed to a grave smile as he looked down into the brown eyes that had lost all of their mischief, and had suddenly grown so tender for the passing moment.

The others shouted with merriment, teased Mona and chatted together with all the nonsense and abandon of youth, for a few minutes before separating to go to their several homes.

Mona went meekly along by David's side. Presently he looked down and asked, "What made you do it, Mona?"

She was dreading this question, but she promptly answered, "I didn't think much about it except that Harry sort of dared me to do it, and I could not bear for him to get ahead of me. I didn't think how you would feel about it until I saw how I had hurt your feelings."

He smiled a sober, forgiving smile, and began at once to talk of something else.

Presently she said in a low tone, "Davie, you don't know how tired I get of staying at home. I know it's dreadful to say it, and I wouldn't tell anybody except you, but I feel sometimes like there wouldn't be a soul on the place, unless it was mammy, who would care if I was to die to-morrow."

"I wouldn't say that," interrupted David in a shocked voice.

"I can't help it, Davie, I believe it is so. Papa never speaks to me except when he wants to find fault, and I seem to be a continual worry to mamma along with her aches and pains. She doesn't seem like she used to be, since she has been sick so much. I know it doesn't sound well, but I just had to say it, and I couldn't tell anybody but you."

"Maybe you imagine it," he suggested soothingly.

"No, I don't think I do," she insisted.

The sun was just setting, and the pale moon was far above the horizon as if impatient for the monarch of day to be gone so that her reign might begin.

David and Mona had walked on silently for a few moments, something rather unusual for Mona. He looked up at the moon and said with unnecessary energy,

"The nights are so fine for rowing now," then looked wistfully at the dimpling river.

"Oh, Davie, mamma would let me go with you anywhere. Let's go to-night. Oh, oh, it's so desperately lonesome at home, it makes me want to do dreadful things sometimes. Do let's go!"

She gesticulated excitedly as she talked, for though she bore the name of her father's Scotch ancestors, the mother's French blood claimed equal recognition in every movement of face and figure.

David looked down at the eager face, and it was well for him that self-control was his inheritance.

"Why, of course we will go," he assented with alacrity. "Why shouldn't we? I am well up with my week's work, and I think we deserve a lark. We haven't taken one in a long time."

They parted at her gate, and she had barely finished her supper when he was back again with the oars over his shoulder. Together they climbed down the steep grassy bank, she skipping gracefully down the path winding in and out among the trees, he following her with a slow swinging stride, his broad shoulders and finely-modeled head towering just above her.

He chose to follow her for two reasons: first, because he liked to think he was where he could watch over and protect her from any possible evil;

and, again, he loved to watch her graceful movements and the shimmer of the moonbeams, as they filtered through the boughs of the trees and fell upon her hair.

David was just budding into manhood. At twenty what doesn't youth dare to dream? Had he not five years ago vowed that some day this sunshiny creature should be his wife, and was he not waiting now only to have something for her to live upon? If all this did seem farther off now than it had then, he could wait for such a wife. He realized that it took all he and Mrs. Strong could earn to keep the twins in school and support them all, so there seemed little chance of his being able to marry for years to come; but hope was as strong within him as youth and love, so never for a moment had he turned aside from the purpose of making her his wife. He had never tried to caress her since the day he helped her down from the sweet-gum tree, but the touch of her hand always thrilled him; to be with her, as he was now, always filled him with a vague longing to seize her and carry her off, by force if need be, for his very own. Sometimes he was filled with rebellion because he might not tell her all that was in his heart, but he was a cool-headed, sensible lad

"DAVIE, I'M IN TROUBLE"

and as a rule was content, as he was to-night, to be with her and bide his time until she was older and he had some means of supporting her.

Once in the boat, he swayed silently to and fro with the oars, feasting his eyes upon her as she sat before him in the glorifying moonlight. Her merry chatter rippled out on the night air to the accompaniment of the softly splashing oars, the gurgle of the water about the cypress trees along the shore, with now and then the sudden noise of some disturbed fish or alligator.

By and by she too became silent and finally said in an excited, tremulous tone, that instantly caught his close attention, " Davie, I'm in trouble and I want you to help me."

" All right," he assented, with a cheerful smile, " you know I like to do that whenever I can."

She gave him a grateful glance, as she replied, " Yes, I know you do, but—but this is different now"—her voice faltered, then stopped, and she busied herself with trailing her hand in the water, watching the bubbles that followed her fingers, like strings of shining jewels. She wondered helplessly for a moment how to go on, with David's keen eyes looking so straight at her while he waited very quietly for her to continue, letting the boat drift meanwhile, that he might give his undivided attention to what she had to say.

Presently she gathered courage and asked: "David, do you know that young Mr. Martin that came here last winter?"

"Ralph Martin? Yes, he is a rather sorry chap," was the grim reply.

"Oh, I think you are mistaken. He seems to be such a nice young man. He has had a hard time, poor fellow. He has nobody to care about him, and he has gotten wild, but, Davie, he—he thinks lots of me and I do—of him."

There she had gotten it out at last. Her head was bent so low that she could not see the white stern face that stooped over her for a moment before David thought of himself and drew back.

Presently she collected her confused thoughts and continued, "You see he wants me to marry him and help him to be a good man." She wound up rather uncertainly.

"I don't doubt it," was the grim rejoinder.

She looked at her old playmate in hurt surprise, then continued, "He says if I will help him he knows he can do right, but if I don't he can't help going straight to ruin. I do want to help him and do that much good in my poor little life. But, oh, Davie, you can help me so much! Won't you please?"

The sweet girlish voice trembled and she looked up with tearful pleading eyes, because David seemed suddenly unlike himself. He was making this so hard for her by his evident lack of sympathy, and it had been a great compliment, if he could only appreciate it, for her to tell him her first little love affair.

"Do your father and mother know?" he questioned gloomily.

"No, I haven't told anybody but you," she answered in a hurt tone, against which he struggled grimly.

"Mona, you are too young for all that," he urged desperately.

"Oh, we are not going to be regularly engaged for a long time. I am just going to help him all I can. I knew you could do more than I could, because you could hunt him up now and then in the evenings and keep him out of bad company. I thought you would do that for me."

Somehow David had suddenly grown so big and stern. Then pride came to her rescue and when David declared impatiently, "That chap is not worth your little finger," she drew herself up very straight and answered in the coolest tone imaginable, "I don't agree with you; but don't worry about it, I will manage some other way."

He knew that her pride was all that kept her from bursting into sobs.

Silently he got out and tied up the boat. This done he held out his hands to assist her. She rose and came to him with her head very high. When she placed her hands in his he held them for a moment and said penitently: "Little girl, I was a selfish brute about it. Of course, I'll help you all I can. I couldn't bear to think of your going away from your old playmate. We have always had such good times together. But I will do my best for your sake, though I do honestly believe you will be disappointed in Martin."

"Thank you, Davie, but I am sure you are the one who is mistaken."

They went up the bank together; she tripping lightly, full of hope; he devouring her with greedy eyes while a fierce young jealousy gnawed at his heart.

CHAPTER XV

FOR MONA

"WHY, how do you do, Mona?" exclaimed Mrs. Strong's cheerful voice as the young girl came in one afternoon, a few days after the events of the last chapter.

"Oh, I'm dreadful sick," declared Mona laughing, as she brought a chair and sat down by the older woman, quite as if she were at home.

"Yes, you look sick," declared Mrs. Strong, admiring the rosy face and buoyant step as she spoke. She was a woman who made every boy and girl she met feel her interest in them, for she loved young people more than anything else in the world. She liked to joke with them, enter into all their fun and see them happy. She would spare no effort to give them wholesome pleasure, but she did not hesitate to condemn what she thought was not best for them.

"Mrs. Strong, I wanted to talk to you about Davie," began Mona taking off her sunbonnet and fanning herself vigorously with it.

"What about Davie?" inquired the good lady a trifle anxiously.

"Well, you see I have been begging him to take dancing lessons. There is a teacher here and a lot of us are taking. I think he needs to have more fun and we all love to have him."

"What does he say?" asked Mrs. Strong quietly, but there was a slight pucker in her forehead.

"Oh, a lot of grandfathery stuff about not having time for such things and about enjoying other pleasures more, but I think it would be good for him and we shall have such a lot of fun. All of our crowd take, and most of us are learning right along, especially Mr. Martin. The dancing-master says he is so intelligent, he is learning to dance beautifully," declared Mona, stopping to get her breath.

"I never heard of anybody's intelligence being in his heels before," remarked Mrs. Strong as she bit off her thread and began another buttonhole.

"Do you think dancing wicked, Mrs. Strong?"

"Oh, no, I never classed it with murder or theft, but I do think a great deal of valuable time is wasted upon it, by young people who should be training their heads more and their feet less; though I believe it is possible for a great deal of harm to come from it, and I don't think professing Christians have any time to waste that way."

"Oh, dear!" sighed Mona dismally; "I was counting on you helping me to persuade David."

"Well, dear, I am sorry for your disappointment, but I must confess I am glad David takes such a sensible view of the matter, for we are very poor, Mona. I, too, wish that David had more pleasure, but it would be extremely foolish for him to take the money, which he needs for more useful things, and the time, which would take his rest and unfit him for work, all to spend for nothing more profitable than dancing. I love to see young people have a good time as much as anybody, but to such exciting entertainment as dancing they are apt to devote too much time and too much strength. Some people claim it is healthy exercise. Possibly it is, if taken in moderation, but few people ever take it moderately, and I believe a great many more injure their health by dancing than ever derive any benefit from it. Nor do I believe it ever made any boy more manly or any girl more womanly to dance."

"Maybe not," was the sober answer, "but I can't help wanting Davie to share all my good times."

"I am glad you feel so about him," answered Mrs. Strong, patting the rosy cheek affectionately.

The girl looked at her with longing in her eyes, then throwing her arms impulsively about the good woman's neck she said, "If we had such jolly times at our house as you do over here, I don't believe I'd care much more about it than Davie does."

"Why bless your heart, child, you are welcome to share our simple good times whenever you like," was the sympathetic answer.

Though Mona went on with her dancing lessons, she did not ask Davie to join them any more, for which he was truly glad; it had hurt him sorely to refuse her, especially as it would have given him the opportunity of being much more in her society. But he consoled himself by promptly seeking ways of keeping his promise concerning Martin. He hunted up his new charge, a good-natured, popular young person, who was swayed by every passing wind that blew. David sought to win his friendship, though he did not fancy the task, for now he must take a greater part of the little time he had heretofore spent with Mona, trying to make another man worthy of her, whom he wanted for himself more than anything else in the world.

It was not his way, however, to do things by halves. Having given Mona his promise, he cultivated Ralph Martin as assiduously as if it had been one of his greatest pleasures.

Martin responded heartily to his friendliness, because he loved friends, and also because David was known as a steady, promising young man. For some time things went very nicely. The fall and winter passed and they succeeded in keeping Martin sober through the Christmas holidays. David took renewed interest after this achievement, especially as Mona seemed to be losing enthusiasm over her happy-go-lucky sweetheart. As her interest waned David's naturally grew.

By spring he began to feel that his charge was comparatively safe, after six months of sobriety, and relaxed his vigilance.

With the first hot lazy days of spring, Martin went out on a fishing expedition, with some of his former wild companions. When David learned that he was gone, he looked grave, but did not mention it to Mona, hoping it would turn out all right. But it was all wrong with Martin. He came back to town hilariously drunk. Unfortunately, the first man he met, after leaving his companions, was Mr. McArthur. Then and there a drunken desire seized the young man to plead his cause. He laid an affectionate hand upon that important person's arm and proceeded to urge his suit with intoxicated fervor.

Mr. McArthur shook him off contemptuously, at which Martin looked up in drunken surprise for a moment, then, as if the other had spoken, said,

" But she—she is in l-love with me. Why, sir, any lady in th-this town would be p-proud to have Ralph Martin in l-love with her. Yes, s-sir, I am going to marry M-Mona right away."

Mr. McArthur again shook him off and hurried home to find Mona. He was filled with rage that such a person should speak so familiarly of any one connected with himself, and was fully determined to sift the matter to the bottom. There was a bad half-hour for Mona and her mother when he did reach them. The mother, a wreck of her former self, endeavored to smooth things over without really comprehending what it was all about. She only succeeded in giving her husband the impression that she knew all about it, and was trying to conceal it from him.

When he turned impatiently from her to Mona for an explanation, the latter set her red lips together, tossed her head and gave ample evidence that she intended to stand her ground. Down in her heart she was tired and out of patience with Martin, but under the circumstances she did not intend to admit it. When her father inquired if she were engaged to the young scapegrace, she answered quite coolly :

" No, sir, but I intend to be as soon as I am old enough."

By her manner it was evidently her opinion that it would not be long.

Her mother, aghast both at her confession and her audacity, made distressed signals to Mona to be more submissive in her father's presence. Both father and daughter were perfectly aware of these signals from the poor feeble woman, but neither gave them any attention; for Mona was gathering her forces for the combat, while Mr. McArthur was rejoicing in the crushing of another rebellious spirit, which he was now about to accomplish. His lip curled as, with exaggerated politeness, he inquired when she expected to marry Mr. Martin. For years this manner had been quite sufficient to crush her mother, and he had no doubt of its conquering Mona, but she had more of his own determination, nor had she been brow-beaten for years, as her mother had. Down in her heart she did not really intend marrying young Martin at all, but she answered with equal politeness, though without her father's scorn, that it was quite out of the question for them to marry soon, as she was entirely too young and Mr. Martin was not earning enough to support them both. The coolness of her reply threw her father into a perfect fury, and he proceeded to portray to her, in rather strong language, Martin's present condition, and his discussion upon the street of their relation.

Though this filled her with loathing for her lover, she was too shrewd to betray it to her father. When he wound up his remarks by stating that she must either marry Martin at once and leave home, or have nothing more to do with him, she silently bowed her acquiescence, leaving him entirely in the dark as to which she intended doing. With this his stubby forefinger was leveled at her, and he said in a tone of unmistakable finality, "If you go with him, your connection with us ceases. I shall have nothing to do with that young sot or any one associated with him." She still remained silent, and at a motion from him left the room. As she went, she heard him ridiculing her mother for her utter failure in raising a daughter worthy of the McArthur name.

As soon as possible Mona hurried from the house and down the street, in the hope of meeting David. She was fully decided as to what she would do. She was too practical to rush blindly into marriage with a drunkard, for whom she no longer cared, simply to oppose her father. What she wanted now was David's advice as to how to proceed in carrying out her decision. She had not gone far when, on turning a corner, she suddenly came face to face with Ralph Martin, reeling and muttering as he came. On seeing her, he gave a start; then, making a great effort to act sensibly, he came up to her with an evident desire to show her his affection and to explain his present appearance.

Her father's description had filled her with loathing; to that was now added terror, for she had never come in contact with a drunken man before. As she stood listening to the maudlin words of the wretch beside her, casting about in her mind how to escape, her heart grew sick at the bare thought of becoming the wife of such a being. But the urgency of escaping the present clutch upon her arm brought her back to reality. She tried gently to disengage his hand, but she found that impossible, without a struggle. Pride both for him and for herself would not allow her to call for help, so she stood pondering what to do next, when she heard a cheerful whistling and looked around to find David rapidly approaching.

"I'm glad I started home to supper early tonight," he called gaily; then taking in the situation at a glance, he asked in a sobered tone, "Say, couldn't you folks walk back to Danver's store with me a few minutes?"

Mona knew that Martin's room was over this store, and after exchanging significant glances with David she acquiesced and they started. David steadied the poor drunkard, who was still clinging with all his might to Mona's arm.

When they reached the foot of the stairs leading to his room David turned to him saying, "Martin, I wish you would take me up to your room a moment. Mona can wait here for us."

"All right," Martin muttered thickly. David half led, half carried him up to his room. Once there, he easily diverted the bewildered mind from Mona and persuaded him to lie down, promising to return after supper.

When the two had disappeared at the head of the stair, Mona looked about her, feeling grateful that it was not a very public corner and that no one was in sight.

She sat down on the bottom step to rest until David returned, which he did in a very few minutes.

"Poor little girl," he said, sympathetically; "I am sorry this happened."

"I brought it on myself," she answered brusquely; but he noted in a quick side glance that she was pale, so pale that a few faint freckles showed across the clear-cut sensitive nose. Her eyes were bright with excitement, while the naturally full lips were drawn to a tight line.

"I guess it's about supper time. I had just started home when I met you," suggested David, endeavoring to divert her mind. He drew her arm through his and turned their steps homeward. They walked along together in silence for a short distance, then she turned with a quick catch in her voice and said, "Davie, don't ever let him come near me again. Tell him I don't want to see him any more. Tell him anything that you think best, but don't let him come. Oh, you can't know how disgusting he has become to me! You won't let him come, will you, Davie? Oh, Davie, please take care of me; nobody understands but you."

"Of course I will," he declared reassuringly.

After this they walked on in silence again until they reached her gate. As he held it open for her to pass in, she stopped in the open gateway long enough to lay an impulsive hand upon his arm as she said gratefully, "Davie, I don't know what I should ever do without you."

CHAPTER XVI

RALPH MARTIN

AFTER supper David picked up his hat to go down to see about Martin.

Mrs. Strong looked up anxiously and asked:

"Going to town, Davie?"

"Yes, mamma."

"I was hoping you had quit going to town so much at night. I don't think it's a good plan, besides it takes you away from your study."

He stood a moment, silently twirling his hat, then he answered slowly:

"I haven't done anything that you would be ashamed of, mamma. Martin is in trouble again, and I promised him I would come back and stay with him awhile."

"Is he?" she asked sadly. "Poor fellow, I am sorry for him. But, Davie, my dear boy, don't let him lead you into temptation. I can't see why you cling to him. I don't believe you can be much help to him and—oh, my dear, you are all I have."

He smiled tenderly and answered, "I would try to be the best man I could just for your sake, even if there was no other reason." After kissing her fondly, he went out wishing that she understood, and walked briskly up the street. As he passed Mr. McArthur's house, Mona's slim white hand waved to him from her window, after which his pace unconsciously quickened. It was a comfort that she understood.

When David reached the foot of the stair leading to Martin's room, he suddenly paused. From the window above streamed a bright light, and by the sounds proceeding from the same direction, he knew that Martin was up and drinking again.

The store over which this room was located was a long two-story wooden building. The upper story was divided into one large and one smaller room. The large one was reached by a stair on the inside and was used for storing goods. The smaller room, in front, had been arranged for an office, but as the little town built northward, this locality had lost its popularity and the office had finally been rented for a bedroom. The means of approaching it was by an outside stair, beginning at one of the rear corners of the building and leading up to a small landing at the room door.

It was a very comfortable room, having two large windows extending down to the floor, just over the little porch in front of the lower story.

Martin was occupying the room alone just now, and David could tell from the voices floating down to him, that he and his old cronies were making a night of it. He hesitated a moment, debating as to whether he should gain anything by going up, but decided that it would at least do no harm, and he would be keeping his promise. When he reached the door he could hear Martin and one of his associates quarreling loudly. His knock was answered by a third voice, evidently nearer the door. He entered and found the owner of this voice lying on the floor, blinking stupidly at the ceiling. The other visitor sat by a table in the centre of the room, while Martin had his chair tilted back by one of the open front windows. Just as David closed the door behind him, Martin sprang to his feet and tried to hurl his chair at the partner of his quarrel, but instead, it fell from his nerveless grasp, his foot slipped and he fell backward out of the window. David sprang hastily to the window, only to see Martin roll from the edge of the sloping porch roof, and the next instant he heard a dull thud upon the street below, then all was still. David, with the others struggling after him, flew down the stairs and around to the front of the store where lay the poor pitiful thing, that had been gay young Martin. He lay so still in the cold white moonlight that it made David shudder as he bent over him. The body had evidently rolled over after falling, for just below the curling blond hair, on his left temple was a dark spot, from which the blood was oozing. It undoubtedly had been made by the corner of the step, which he must have struck in his fall. The others were quite sober now, and together they carried him up the stairs and laid him on the bed. One was immediately dispatched for the doctor, while David and the other remained to do the little in their power. The doctor came presently, but nothing could be done. The heedless, handsome young man had reaped the sowing of a dissolute ancestry just a little sooner and a little more suddenly than most of his kind.

After everything was put to rights, the dead man's two companions begged to be allowed to remain with him through the night, while David, as soon as possible, hurried to break the sad news to Mona. He found her curled up in a big chair on the veranda looking quite lonely and sad.

"Where is your father?" he asked as he drew himself a chair up beside hers.

"Oh, he is down at the office," as if no one ever expected him to be anywhere else.

"Your mother?" he questioned next.

"Mamma went to her room directly after supper. David, what makes you look so queer? Have you seen R—Mr. Martin? Oh, David, do tell me what is the matter!" exclaimed the girl imploringly.

"Yes, I have just come from Martin," he replied slowly, wondering how he could finish the story.

"Is he sobered up any?" she whispered fearfully.

"Yes, he is quite sober," was the hesitating reply.

"Did, did you tell him not to—to never come near me any more?" she questioned incoherently.

"He won't ever bother you again."

Something in David's tone made her question fearfully, "What is the matter with him?"

"He fell from his window and——" David choked and could not continue.

"And he's dead." She finished the sentence with desperate calmness.

Instinctively he put out his hand to her. She caught it between her own and bowing her face upon it, burst into long shuddering sobs.

"Oh, Davie, he is dead, and it's all my fault! We quarreled last week. He got mad and went on this trip to spite me. Oh, I have killed him, I have killed him, what shall I do?" she wailed.

"I'd try not to feel that way. You couldn't go on always petting him and holding him up. This was bound to come sooner or later," declared David huskily.

"I cannot help feeling that I am all to blame," wailed the girl. "I grew tired of him and didn't try as I should." He said no more but softly stroked the bowed head with his disengaged hand.

By and by the sobbing grew calmer and she looked up saying,

"Davie, I thought your God could do anything. Why didn't he help you to prevent this?"

He sprang up at the question, then remembering himself he sat down again and answered, "God forgive me, I never asked him; I tried to do it all by myself."

"Why, Davie, I thought you asked God to help you about everything?" she questioned wonderingly, for of all she knew David was the nearest to a model Christian.

"I ought to," was the gloomy response; "but I have grown careless."

Another silence followed, then he asked, "Why do you speak of God as my God? Is he not yours, too?"

"No," she answered with painful frankness, "I think I am a born heathen. I don't believe I want a God. I have sometimes felt like I wished he were mine, that I could trust him as you do, and tell him my troubles, but if you couldn't tell him about this, then I don't care for him."

"I could have told him and gotten his help, too. It was only my own carelessness and foolishness that made me do as I did," cried David, more miserable than ever. He paused a moment, then went on, "Oh, Mona, if you would only let him, he would comfort and help you now, in this trouble."

"No, I don't think he could," she answered wearily. "At least, I don't care to try the experiment just now. It is getting late, Davie, and you have your own work to do. You can't help me any more, now," and her head drooped for just an instant against his shoulder. What would he not have given to take her in his arms and comfort her poor distressed heart? But he knew she wanted to be alone, and from her frequent glances up the street he guessed that she wished to go to her room before her father came, so he bade her a sad good-night and went home. He could not sleep, and finally gave up trying. An hour later Mona, crouching by her window, saw him pacing to and fro in the little flower garden, white and odorous with cape jasmines. "Poor old fellow!" she murmured to herself; "it's troubling him as well as me," and the lonely girl found comfort even in the companionship of misery; but ever after she associated the odor of cape jasmines with that sorrowful night.

CHAPTER XVII

MONA'S TROUBLE

ONE morning in August, after carefully dusting every room in the house and putting the few flowers that the heat had spared in the vases, Mona flung herself listlessly into a hammock on the veranda. Once settled she felt too indifferent to get up, but lay with her hands clasped above her head, idly enjoying, after a fashion, the scenery all about her.

From one side, she could look up the principal street of the little town, with irregular partially shaded walks; or out across the gleaming river, as it slipped lazily by between green banks dotted with glossy palmettos, shaded by stately pines and gum trees, all draped in luxuriant vines or the long mournful gray moss, brightened here and there by wild flowers or scarlet berries.

By simply turning her head, she had another view equally charming. Upon the back fence were perched a row of little pickaninnies, sunning themselves and chattering together like so many blackbirds. A little beyond them, their mothers went about their cabins washing, hanging up long lines of snowy clothes, calling to each other or singing as they worked. Over their heads, as everywhere, were the tall pines and gnarled sweet-gum trees, with their long ragged veils of gray moss. Still back of this, the trees had been cut away. Men could be seen running to and fro or stacking in great even piles the long yellow pine planks that flashed in the morning sunlight, then fell with a resounding slam, one after another with the regularity of clockwork. Above it all, the busy hum of the sawmill whence the lumber came, could be plainly heard on the still morning air. Farther off were trees again, but so far away that all distinct outline was lost in a wonderful mass of ever-changing greens, grays and purples.

As much as she loved it, Mona took a languid interest in it just now. All the various sounds combined to sing her a song of sorrow, while before every beauty of nature, there came the pale, haunting face of Ralph Martin as she last saw it.

By and by the noon whistles began to blow, but they only followed other notes in the mournful melody; still she did not stir. David passed, but she would not have noticed him, had he not called cheerily to her. She did not heed the wistful look upon his face as he noted her thin white hands, pale cheeks, slight figure and sad haunting eyes.

As he turned in at his own gate, he thought, "What would I not give to have her as she was a year ago?"

He went in to his dinner with a preoccupied manner, which Mrs. Strong was quick to notice; but, knowing his aversion to having any change in himself mentioned, she went quietly on with her eating, waiting for him to speak of what was uppermost in his mind.

Presently the unusual quiet aroused him and glancing up he asked in surprise, "Why, where are the girls?"

"Poor boy, he is so troubled he did not even notice their absence," thought Mrs. Strong, but she smiled pleasantly as she answered, "They are spending the day with a friend."

He relapsed into silence again for a few moments, then pushing his plate of almost untasted food from him he said, "Mamma, don't you think Mona looks dreadful?"

"Yes," she answered thoughtfully. "This warm weather seems to have pulled her down pretty bad."

"Do you really think it is that?" he questioned earnestly.

"No, I don't," she replied reluctantly.

"Mamma," and his tone grew almost pathetic, "what can I do for her?"

"I don't believe you can do anything," was the deliberate response. "I'll tell you what I will do though, I'll go over and suggest to her mother that she ought to take Mona away somewhere for a change. It is very warm now and new people and new scenes might rouse her."

"I wish you would do something," said David gratefully. "It bothers me to see her like she is." Then suddenly the care-worn face before him caught his eye. "You don't look very well yourself," he suggested, anxiously. "I wish you could take a trip, or at least hire a cook for a while so you could have a rest."

"Oh, dear, no," she cried merrily; "I don't know any place in the world that I would rather be than right here; and, as to a cook, I wouldn't know what to do with one. Besides if I kept a cook, how should I ever train my girls to be good cooks. Then, David, I have noticed that people who keep servants never have any private affairs. We haven't any great secrets, yet I wouldn't like to have all our little affairs discussed publicly."

"My, my! I didn't know how objectionable a cook was," he declared smiling.

Then she said soberly, "We must all work, my son. I don't intend that you shall always have your nose to the grindstone."

He made light of her anxiety about himself and hurried back to his work.

"Poor boy," murmured the motherly soul, looking after him with swimming eyes, "he is good enough for any woman living, if he *is* my boy."

With busy, cheery Mrs. Strong to resolve was to act. She rapidly cleared up the dinner dishes, changed her dress, and getting her work hastened over to Ann McArthur's, who was always pleased to have her spend the afternoon.

They chatted quite cozily for a while, then Mrs. Strong came around to the object of her visit by asking, "Where is Mona?"

"I think she is around somewhere, reading. I don't know what has come over Mona, she is so quiet and absent-minded of late. Why, you'd hardly know she was on the place," declared Mrs. McArthur, fretfully.

"I don't think she looks very well, Ann," suggested Mrs. Strong, tentatively.

"No, I don't believe she does, Miss Bettie," declared Mrs. McArthur. Evidently it was the first time she had thought of it. She was too busy being ill herself, poor woman. "She hasn't complained any," went on the invalid, after a thoughtful pause. Then she asked abruptly, "What do you suppose is the matter with her? Maybe she is bilious."

Mrs. Strong put out her hand with an impatient gesture, but as quickly drew it back before the other noticed it.

"Why, la, Ann, how do I know?" she asked evasively.

She pityingly realized that this poor, colorless wreck had gotten beyond discretion in her wandering conversation, and so dared say nothing which she did not wish repeated to Mr. McArthur, or in fact, to any one who might chance to talk with her.

"What would you do about her?" inquired Mrs. McArthur, plaintively. To have judged by the poor woman's manner, one would have thought the care of a large family was upon her, a burden almost too heavy to be borne by such frail shoulders. Like many women, who had nothing to do, she thought she had far more than her share of responsibility. Had it not been for this cheerful, hard-working neighbor to brighten her life, she would doubtless have been plunged in continual gloom. Mr. McArthur had long since formed the habit of buying what he thought she needed, without consulting her, because he had so little respect for her judgment. To do him justice, however, he never bought stingily, for he took a pride in having his wife and daughter well clothed and his table well supplied, just as he did in having his horse well fed. As far as household duties were concerned, mammy managed them all. The thought of disturbing her "poor sick mistiss" would have aroused her greatest indignation.

As Mona grew older, she had taken many light tasks upon herself, because she loved mammy or because she took a pride in having things in order. This greatly pleased the old negress, and in return she taught the girl a number of things about housekeeping. Mrs. Strong was employed to do their sewing, so there was nothing left to rouse Mrs. McArthur from her ailments. These she dwelt upon to the exclusion of almost everything else, until even the duty of training and caring for her one darling daughter became very irksome to her, and she had gradually come to look entirely to Mrs. Strong for direction in this.

Now that the latter had suggested to her that Mona was not as she should be, she instantly realized the truth of it, but at the same time, looked to her friend to say what should be done.

"What would you do, Miss Bettie?" she inquired again, as the other hesitated to answer.

"Perhaps if you could take her off on a visit or something like that, it might do her good," suggested Mrs. Strong, as if the idea had just occurred to her.

The next morning as they prepared for breakfast, Mrs. McArthur asked,

"Mr. McArthur, does Mona look pale to you?"

"Why, yes, perhaps so," was his rather vague reply.

"Miss Bettie and I were talking about it yesterday. I asked her what she reckoned was the matter. She said she didn't know, possibly a change would help her," she continued.

Mr. McArthur was evidently listening, and it was so seldom that he paid much heed to what she said nowadays, that she was loath to stop talking.

"Perhaps she does," he agreed, for he had as much respect for Bettie Strong's opinion as for that of any one he knew. He agreed in such a final manner, however, that Mrs. McArthur did not venture upon further conversation.

At the supper-table, that night, Mr. McArthur said, "Mona, get your things ready to go off to boarding-school. Tom Adkins is going to take his girl the first of September, and you are going with them."

Mona and her mother kept their eyes upon their plates in silence until the gate clicked after him on his way back to town.

CHAPTER XVIII

A YEAR'S CHANGE

THE few days given to Mona, in which to make her preparation for boarding-school, were so filled with excitement and responsibility that she was effectually aroused, and David's heart rejoiced to see her already improving, now that she had something to take her mind off of her troubles. He felt sad at the thought of the coming separation from his old playmate, sad because he knew he should be lonely without her, and also from fear of her growing away from him; but he sternly resolved to keep up with her if he had to study half the night. Nothing could have proved more beneficial to Mona's health and spirits, nor was she averse to going, although she felt, after her father announced his summary decision as to her going, that she might have been consulted in the matter. Still she accepted it quite cheerfully, only adding this slight to her dignity and age, to the already lengthy account against her father. She speedily passed this by, and her entrance into school proved even more entertaining than the preparation for it. She readily made friends and was soon as popular with her new schoolmates as with the ones at home. The year passed swiftly and pleasantly for her, but it was a lonely year for David. He had occasional letters from her, through her mother, which were always promptly answered and returned by the same hand. He was intensely lonely at times, but worked all the harder because of it. He kept always before him the thought that she was going to be a polished, educated woman, and he was determined that she should not outgrow him or be ashamed of him. He had never, for a moment, feared for his parentage. He instinctively felt that sooner or later he should successfully search for his own people; that when he found them he should be proud of their relationship, and he was determined that they, as well as Mona, should not be ashamed of him. He carried with him a sense of refinement and good breeding that withheld him from coarse vulgarity. He felt that he had a claim to an honorable family name waiting for him somewhere, and he must have a character worthy of it. If he never found his own name, then he must be an honor to the one so kindly lent him by his faithful foster-parents.

Not only must he keep Mona from being

ashamed of him, but he must be worthy of her, when he asked her to be his wife. He had no patience with a man who could lightly throw away his youth, and then count it a virtue to grovel at some good woman's feet, taking pride in his humility. He believed in himself, with God to help him. He thought the world a goodly place in which to live, full of opportunity for him who was determined to succeed. He had made up his mind to be one of the successful. Slowly but steadily he had climbed from the position of office boy to that of assistant bookkeeper in the office of the busy humming sawmill. Perhaps some day he would have a big sawmill of his own, who could tell? What may a man not dare to hope at twenty-two?

He had gone to night school and taken a fairly good business course. Between times he had read good substantial books that lay a good broad foundation, read carefully until his education compared favorably with any young man's of his acquaintance.

Of society he knew scarcely anything. The little knowledge he possessed was what he had gathered from his reading. In his little world he had no rules to guide him but his good common sense as to the fitness of things and his inborn fineness of nature.

Such we find him on the perfect June night in which Mona was expected home from school. It was too warm to stay indoors, so Mrs. McArthur sat upon her veranda, with faithful mammy on the steps below her, while in the little honeysuckle covered bower over the way, the Strongs waited with equal impatience for Mona's home-coming. Mrs. Strong, Bess and Maud called now and then to Mrs. McArthur, or speculated among themselves as to the changes wrought by the year at boarding-school, in their merry young friend. David sat silent upon the steps below them. His square jaws were set firmly, and his eyes looking out above the high cheek bones, which betrayed some far off Indian ancestor, were bright and resolute.

When he met Mona at the little depot half an hour later, she seemed the gladder of the two, but she gave vent to her feelings, while he always held his in check.

They took up their old habits just where they had left off; going to church together on the Sabbath, he because of his deep vigorous piety, she because it was her habit; going for an occasional boat ride together before supper when

David came home in time, sometimes taking the twins with them, but oftener alone. Mona was her old bright self again, and David was content. The twins, perhaps a little jealous of his devotion to Mona, perhaps quite right in their view of the matter, often intimated that Mona had grown a trifle self-conceited, until David sternly silenced them by telling them in good plain English that Mona had a right to think well of herself, and even if she did take on some little boarding-school airs, she had entirely too much sense not to outgrow them.

One Sunday afternoon David went over for a long chat. He found Mona buried in a big easy chair, her chin in one palm, staring disconsolately out of the window. After a glance he inquired:

"What's the matter?"

"Oh, nothing much," she answered with an evident effort to look more cheerful. He said no more, but drew up a chair beside her, knowing that she would confide her trouble to him presently.

"Where is your mother?" he inquired, by way of starting a conversation, as he settled himself in the roomy old-fashioned chair. She gave him a quick curious look, wondering if he could, by any possible chance, have known that her mother was the subject of her thoughts.

But the look he gave back was of frank kindly interest, and she answered bitterly, "She is asleep—as usual."

It was his turn to look at her in quick surprise. She met the look squarely and grasping the arms of her chair as if about to have a tooth drawn she asked, "Davie, how long has this morphine business been going on?"

"How did you find out?" he inquired evasively.

"Anybody can see it. Please answer my question," she insisted.

"For years, I think," was his steady answer. He could not look at her now, but gazed out of the window.

Her hand crept timidly over to the arm of his chair and instantly his fingers closed over it with a firm comforting clasp of sympathy.

"I never knew until I came home this summer. I could see that she was different from other girls' mothers, but I didn't understand. Davie, it is so terrible. She has changed so much since I went away to school. I can't believe she is going to live long, yet —— oh, Davie!—I try so hard, but I can't be sorry to think so."

"Oh, you mustn't say that," he murmured with dry lips. "She is your mother. Mamma is so good to me and I love her dearly, yet what wouldn't I give to see my own mother."

"Even if she were like mine?" questioned Mona, anxiously.

David thought a moment, then answered soberly, "Yes, I am sure I would."

"Perhaps you are right. What am I saying? I know you are right," she declared sadly; "but this was such a shock. Oh, you don't know how it hurt me, Davie!" she gasped with a sob.

CHAPTER XIX

MRS. MCARTHUR

SOME very busy days passed, after the occurrences of the last chapter, in which David saw little of Mona. One cloudy Sunday morning he sauntered over to make her a little visit, before time for her to dress for church. Just as he entered the door, she came gaily down the long hall, with a broom in one hand and a turkey wing in the other.

"Can I do anything for you, sir?" she demanded with a sweeping bow.

"To be sure, you always can," he answered smiling into the bright young face.

"What?" she questioned.

"Oh, you can always make me happy," was the rather indefinite reply.

"Can I? When did you learn to flatter?" she inquired saucily.

"I never do," he replied.

Suddenly she tiptoed and took off his hat.

"Oh, I beg pardon, I forgot I had it on," he apologized.

"That's all right," she said as she examined it critically. "Say, Davie, this hat is too shabby for you to wear. Give it to me for a dust cap. I want it to take back to school with me," and she tucked the soft brown felt hat over her ruddy curls and peeped into the hall mirror to see the effect.

David secretly wondered what she would do if he were to yield to temptation by catching her in his arms and kissing her, but he manfully crushed the desire and answered quite carelessly:

"Of course you can have it, if you want it," although he knew he must wear his "Sunday" hat on all occasions until he drew his next month's salary.

"Oh, thank you," she bubbled. "See, it just matches my hair, though the hat *is* brown and the hair red. Queer, isn't it?"

It remained cloudy all day, and with dark came a pouring rain. The Strongs were gathered about their cheerful sitting-room table after supper, enjoying the pleasant contrast of indoors with the outside, when there came a sudden rattling at the front door. Before David could reach it, Mona flung it wide open and stood on the threshold dripping wet, with David's old hat pulled down over her curls, while her eyes were bright with terror.

"Oh, Davie, come quick! Mamma wants you. She is so strange. I'm afraid she's—she's dying!" she cried above the roar of the rain.

"Why, Davie, hurry. I'll follow as soon as I can," exclaimed Mrs. Strong; but David needed no second bidding. Already he had on his "slicker" and had joined Mona on the steps. When he reached the ground he found it covered with water. Without a word, he turned and taking Mona up in his arms, strode out of the gate and across to Mr. McArthur's. At the gate a negro passed them and was dispatched in haste for Mr. McArthur and the doctor.

"Oh, Davie," murmured Mona as he put her down at her own door, "please forget all the dreadful things I said to you about mamma. I thought I meant it, but I was mistaken. I would give anything if I could just take them back."

"That's all right," he reassured her; "let's both forget them. Run and change those wet clothes, and I will go and stay with your mother until you can come."

With a heavy heart he went up to the old familiar room, where he had spent so many of his happy childhood hours. He found Mrs. McArthur conscious and very calm. She smiled faintly when he came to the bedside and said, in a weak voice, "I am dying, Davie. I thought you would come if I sent for you, especially by Mona, because you have always been so careful about her. Oh, Davie, keep on taking care of her for me, when I am gone! After she is old enough to marry, I would rather you had her than any one else; but Davie, if that doesn't suit you and her, then watch over her and don't let her marry any man unless she loves him; but above everything else, don't let any man marry her for what little property she may have. The most terrible thing that can come to a woman, is to love a man and awake to the fact that he has married her for her money. I don't want her life wrecked as mine has been. Oh, Davie, I have been a poor excuse for a mother, but you will take care of her for me, won't you?" She lay quite still from exhaustion after this long speech, but the appeal in her eyes would have gone to his heart, even if her words had not.

He answered solemnly, "Mrs. McArthur, if there is ever anything I can do for Mona's happiness, rest assured I will do it. I think you understand that it is the dearest wish of my heart to make her my wife, if she will let me, as soon as she is old enough, and I am able to marry."

She nodded her head in assent. Before he could say any more, Mona entered and the conversation was at an end. Mona knelt by the bedside, and he stepped over to the window, feeling that this was a scene too sacred for any one else to witness.

"Oh, mamma, mamma!" murmured the girl in a voice she strove to keep calm, "please forgive all my carelessness and unkindness. I love you, mamma, truly, you don't know how much; but I haven't treated you as I should. Please, mamma."

The suffering woman turned slightly, and her wasted hand passed over her child's head in a feeble caress.

"There is nothing to forgive, my darling. I haven't been the mother that I should have been; but pray God you may never understand the terrible bitterness of my life. I want you to learn how to be a Christian. I never could, somehow. Miss Bettie has had trouble, as well as I, but she has something in her life that I never had. I think it must be religion."

She said all this in a voice that sounded more natural than it had for years, then paused and closed her eyes while a terrible paroxysm of pain passed over the ashen face, which it was well the youthful eyes, buried in the end of her pillow, did not see. After it was gone, Mrs. McArthur rested a moment and then went on: "Somehow, I never could take hold of religion, but I know now that I did not try hard enough. The way has all been dark. Now I am dying, still in the dark, and nobody can help me."

Mona rose and putting her arm over her mother, kissed her tenderly and said, "Mamma, I never loved you so much as now. Let's hope that you are mistaken. Oh, I want you to live! Only think what good times we have missed together, and maybe we can have them yet."

The woman's face brightened, then the light slowly died out and she sadly shook her head.

"No, it's too late," she whispered; "but I am glad you thought of it. It has helped me so much for you to care. I thought nobody cared. Perhaps I have misjudged your father too. But, Mona, I want you to be a Christian. We have always said our prayers together every night, but I don't think it has done either of us much good."

"I'll try, mamma," promised the girl huskily.

Steps were now heard on the stairs, and Mr. McArthur entered, followed by the doctor, Mrs. Strong and poor distressed mammy.

On the husband's face there was a look of annoyance.

The doctor hastened to examine his patient; Mrs. Strong stood ready to do his bidding; mammy sat in a corner, rocking herself to and fro in a helpless agony of grief, while Mona stood by her mother holding one cold wasted hand between her own, and eagerly watched the doctor's face for some ray of hope. Mr. McArthur glanced once in the direction of his wife, then seating himself, he crossed one knee over the other and waited, with evident impatience, for whatever was to follow.

Presently the sufferer opened her eyes and also looked with eager, questioning gaze at the doctor. To both her and Mona's appeal, he silently shook his head and turning to Mrs. Strong he gave directions for giving his patient temporary relief. At a word from his mother, David quickly lent his assistance, glad of something to do to relieve the strain.

Mrs. McArthur lay quite still for a time; then, opening her eyes, she looked eagerly around until she found her husband, when she spoke in a strange, husky voice: "Mr. McArthur, Donald, I'm dying; won't you kiss me good-bye?"

In her voice lay all the pent-up agony of years of neglect, but he was insensible to it, and a swift shade of irritation passed over his face as he replied without stirring, "You are doing very nicely, Mrs. McArthur."

David could not resist giving Mona a quick look of sympathy, but she did not see him. The glance she flung at her father was not good to see; then hastily putting her own feelings aside, she bent over her mother and whispered tenderly, "Never mind, mamma, he doesn't understand."

"No, he doesn't understand," repeated the other wearily, and closed her eyes while a wan pinched look came into her face that had not been noticeable before. Mona kissed and caressed her, striving to atone for her father's indifference, long after her mother ceased to respond.

After a time, at a sign from the doctor, David drew her away and led her sobbing from the room. Down in the parlor he begged her to lie down on the couch to rest.

"Oh, Davie, how could he, how could he? It's a terrible thing to despise your own father, and yet I can scarcely keep from it."

She flung her arms about his neck and sobbed out her misery upon his sympathetic breast. He soothed her as best he could, and finally succeeded in getting her to lie down, by promising to sit by her through the night.

It was some time before she grew quiet, and near morning when she slept. When she awoke the first faint light of dawn was stealing in and faithful David still sat beside her.

Seeing that she was awake, he stooped and kissing her gently upon the forehead, saying, "I must go now; but, little girl, whenever I can help you in any way, you must promise to call on me."

"I will, Davie," she promised gratefully; "but before you leave let's go see mamma. You know we can't see her much longer," she added sorrowfully.

Hand in hand, like two frightened children, they slipped in to gaze again upon the now peaceful face.

If Mona had found home lonely before, now it was doubly so. Mammy was her only company in the big deserted house. Frequently after everything was in order, she took her work to the sunny kitchen, the most cheerful room in the house, where she spent her morning with mammy. The faithful old negress bravely put aside her own grief to cheer "her chile," as she endearingly called her young mistress. The girl's reserve, peculiar in one of her temperament, shut out every one, even her tried friend, Mrs. Strong, in her hour of darkness. To none but David could she open her heart freely. Yet she did not say a great deal to him, although between them there was perfect understanding.

At first Mona shrank from her father's presence with a feeling akin to loathing. Gradually this changed to pity, pity for his evident lack of feeling or affection. Had he known of it, this pity would doubtless have amused him, yet it saved her from hating him. She could overlook the fact that he had never shown any affection for herself, but his deliberate refusal to her dying mother's starved heart had been a revelation of what had gone before and was almost more than she could bear.

"But after all," she reflected when she could think calmly upon the subject, "an iceberg cannot help being cold, although its being helpless doesn't make it any more comfortable to live by."

She also realized that she had not done her duty toward her mother and she determined not to lay up another burden for herself, by neglecting her father's comfort; so she did all in her power to make the lonely home pleasant, while down in the kitchen mammy muttered rebelliously at her wasted efforts on his behalf, and Mr. McArthur pursued the even tenor of his way, as if nothing had happened.

School time was drawing near, and one morning Mona timidly broached the subject at the breakfast-table, by asking, "Papa, do you wish me to go back to school this year, or would you like to have me stay here with you?"

"What? Oh, you will go back to school, of course. I don't need you," he replied with evident surprise.

"I thought you might get lonely," she suggested in a tone which to a closer observer would have indicated mingled regret and relief.

"I never get lonely," he declared proudly, and she knew it was not an unselfish remark to make her comfortable but a simple statement of a fact.

So the conversation ended, and, with a clear conscience, Mona got ready for school.

David dreaded her going, yet for her sake he could but be glad. He knew better than any one else how lonely she was and that she was grieving more than was good for her. He did not have much time to give to her, for this happened to be a busy time in the office.

Late one Sunday afternoon, Mona sat at the piano playing, a thing she did exceptionally well, for a girl of her age. She was not a genius, but she had the soft, caressing touch of one who loved to play and could put her mood into her music. This time it was a sad, mournful air that crept from under her fingers, and wandered out on the Sabbath stillness. David, listening, knew that she needed cheering, and directly his dark head and broad shoulders appeared in the window at her side. She started, smiled, then begged him to come in, which he promptly did, right through the open window.

" Play some more," he suggested, politely.

" No, let's talk," she replied, closing the piano. " I can play when I get back to school, but I cannot talk to you then."

" Except on paper," he suggested hopefully.

" Well, that has to be so seldom," she objected, " and besides the mood I write in is gone so long before I get your answer," she answered whimsically.

He smiled at her reply and said consolingly, " Yes, but it's the best we can do while you are in school."

She nodded, then said abruptly, " Davie, I didn't know I was so selfish—no," as he started to interrupt her, "you listen a minute. Don't try to smooth it over, for my mind is made up about it. I know I haven't thought much about pleasing other people, but I feel especially bad about not trying harder to please mamma and make her happier. It's so lonely without her, but I don't wish her back, because she suffered so, though I did at first. But I know now I could have given her so much pleasure, if I had tried, and that's what hurts most of all."

They were both silent for a moment after she finished speaking, then David suggested, "How would it do to begin now and try to do things the way she would want you to do?"

Her face brightened at the suggestion and she answered, "I think that is a good plan, Davie; it will be such a comfort. I am so glad you suggested it to me."

He made no reply, but looked gratified, while she went on to talk of her school work and all the plans for the coming year.

Presently she asked, "Now, what are your plans? You haven't told me a thing about them in ages."

He laughed and answered, "Oh, you don't want to bother with my poor, uncertain plans. They would be dull and hopeless beside yours."

"No, indeed, I do want to hear them."

He rose, and putting his hands in his pockets, strode the length of the room and back before he began. When he again stood facing her, his hands still in his pockets, he said deliberately, "I mean some day to be the biggest lumberman in southeast Texas."

"Oh," she said, her eyes twinkling with fun and admiration, "you don't expect much. But, Davie, I wanted you to be a professional man."

"No, I can't do that," he replied promptly, as if expecting the remark. "I have thought it all over again and again. I know this is best. I can't take the time, and haven't the money to go away to school and learn a profession. I must make a living for us all and educate the girls. To be a lumberman, I earn my living and learn at the same time. Anyway, why is a professional man any better than a man who is able to give honest employment to numbers of deserving workmen and so help them to support their families? Why, Mona, you don't know how much good a man can do in such a position, besides having honorable employment for himself."

"No, I guess not," she answered soberly. "I was thinking only of you. I didn't care much about the others. I want *you* to succeed, Davie."

"Do you?" he questioned eagerly; "then I shall try all the harder for your sake, though that is the only chance I see for my success now."

"Flatterer," she replied teasingly, then went on in a more serious tone. "But you have studied hard for so long, and I feel like it should come to more than that. I know plenty of nice boys who have gone off to the best schools, and still are not your mental equals. Even an ignorant man can succeed fairly well as a lumberman, and you have laid such a good foundation for a fine education."

"An educated, polished gentleman will show anywhere. Don't worry about my hiding my light under a bushel. If I could make a good lumberman while ignorant, I can make a better one with an education. If I could have chosen, this would not have been my choice; but I recognize it as my one opportunity, and I must make the most of it. Of course, I want to make a cultivated man, and be prepared to—to fill my place and ——"

He broke off suddenly, and she looked curiously at the dull red that had suffused his face, nor did it pale under her scrutiny.

"Play," he commanded, opening the piano, and she did so with all the ability she possessed, while he listened with eager ears.

When she had finished, he was his own composed self and she could not know how near he had come to telling her his chief ambition, in spite of himself.

CHAPTER XX

A GREAT REVIVAL

TWO years passed with but little to interest our readers. Mona went to school, had her fun and her work, the usual number of ups and downs of every wide-awake schoolgirl's life. She spent her summers at home in the same way she had always done, except for the fact that her mother was not there. She was gentle and more thoughtful, but otherwise the same. She kept her old friends, made new ones, and managed to have fairly good times at home as well as at school.

David worked on with his same fixed purpose, having no thought for any girl but Mona, never doubting his ability to win her when the time came, never thinking of a possible rival. She seemed already to belong to him, to have always been his, which attitude she would doubtless have resented, could she have known of its existence.

Being an only child, she readily accepted his devotion as brotherliness. She was not a girl to have many lovers. She was the confidential friend of half the boys she knew, as well as of the girls. She good-naturedly helped them all alike, caring little for love affairs of her own so long as she had plenty of friends and company.

This was the condition of affairs when David escorted her to the depot on the day that she started off for her last year at school.

Mammy waved the cup towel from the kitchen window and rejoiced that, "next time my baby gwine ter come home ter stay."

Mrs. Strong looked hopefully after her and prayed the same prayer for Mona that she always prayed, that she might not inherit her father's selfishness nor her mother's weakness. The twins waved their sunbonnets and thought how fine it must be to go away to boarding-school, while Mr. McArthur, who had bidden her a formal little farewell, on his way to town wondered in his calculating way, if all the money he was putting into her education was well invested.

The idea of giving any of his time to her training or companionship never entered his mind. He felt that his whole duty was done when he furnished her all the money she needed. So Mona went away with high hopes for her senior year at college. If she longed for her father to show a little more interest, at parting, or wondered if the Strongs would miss her very much, she said nothing about it, but kept a brave face and waved a smiling farewell.

One raw chilly Sabbath in midwinter, Mrs. Strong was kept at home from church, with a cold. Though not daring to venture out in the chill wind, she was not really ill, and so, long before David and the girls came home from church, she had a smoking hot dinner prepared for them, while a bright fire burned upon the sitting-room hearth, and she sat before it thinking how pleasant it was to look for her children, and rejoicing that she had taken them into her life years ago. She was still entertaining herself with these comfortable thoughts when Maud rushed in followed, as usual, by Bess.

As we have paid little attention to the twins, perhaps it is just as well to give the reader a better acquaintance with them now, as they stand before the only mother they have ever known. Maud is a wiry, slim, restless, black-eyed girl, brimful of energy and independence, who has always done the managing for Bess as well as herself. Bess is plump, rosy, blue-eyed and docile.

Naturally it now falls to Maud to tell the cause of their present excitement.

"Oh, mamma, what do you think? Brother Post has resigned."

"What, is Brother Post going to desert our poor little church? We have done poorly enough with him to preach to us twice a month, what will we do without any preacher at all?"

Just at this moment David entered and confirmed the bad news. They were all fond of the faithful white-haired pastor and grieved that failing health made it necessary for him to leave them. All through dinner they discussed the condition of affairs and wondered what was to be done next. Without exception this was a Christian household, and the loss of a pastor was a momentous disaster. Mrs. Strong's years of faithful work and interest in religious matters had borne fruit in her own home as well as in the town, and these young people were deeply interested in whatever concerned the church.

Naturally, Mrs. Strong was the first to recover her hopefulness. After they had discussed the matter gloomily for some time she said, "Well, children, the Lord gave us Brother Post, and I am sure he can at least give us another just as good. I hate to give him up, but who knows, it may bring about a big revival, and no telling how many people converted and added to the church. Why, we can't tell what the Lord may have in store for us," and her face fairly shone with the enjoyment of her vision.

David smiled gloomily and said, "It seems to me you are counting chickens before they are hatched."

She laughed good-naturedly as she replied, "Well, I have noticed that the people who never count their chickens before they hatch are not apt to count so many after. Besides, if you don't count them before, sometimes you don't get to count them at all. But, children, that does not apply in religious matters. The Lord is never uncertain. All the uncertainty is with us."

"But how do you hope to be benefited by Brother Post's departure?" inquired Maud.

"Well, I believe the fact that he has to leave indicates that his work is done here. Perhaps a new pastor will arouse new interest and get some to work who are indifferent now. You know, different men can reach different people. In the meantime I think some of us have possibly been trusting Brother Post too much and the Lord too little."

After dinner was over, the dishes cleared away, and the girls had gone to their room, Mrs. Strong came back to the sitting-room, to find David stretched upon the home-made rug before the fire, as she thought, fast asleep. But just as she started to throw a large shawl over him, he turned his face toward her and asked, "Mamma, what's the use trying any longer? I have tried, ever since I joined the church, to do my duty and make religion attractive to the other boys, but I am the only one in our crowd that has ever even made a profession of religion. There are Christians enough living here to have made this a Christian town long before this, and yet, there were perhaps two or three dozen at Sunday-school, and as many at church. Now that Brother Post is going away, I guess we will just have to give up."

She listened to him quietly until he was quite through, then going over to the table she got her well worn Bible, and without a word of explanation, read him the old story of Elijah's discouragement. When she had finished reading and had closed the book, David looked up with a faint smile and asked, "So you think we have 'seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal'?"

"Yes, comparatively," she replied, then read again. This time it was the wonderful history of Pentecost.

After a few moments of thoughtful silence he asked hesitatingly, "Do you think we fail, because we grow discouraged and don't pray?"

"Certainly, we are despondent and we rely upon ourselves rather than upon God. We try to work in Sabbath-school and all other church work upon our own ability, without God's help. We don't pray enough. There was a time when men and women shut themselves up to read and pray, but did not work for God. Now we go to the other extreme, think we must work all the time and do not take time to study God's word and pray. They were always trying to take in without giving out anything, while we are trying to give out of our own righteousness and not stopping to draw on God for a fresh supply of the genuine article. If Christians would pray as they did before Pentecost, we should see something happen. God is just as able now as he was then. The trouble is all with us; we don't depend upon him."

"I suppose you are right," he answered musingly; "but what are we to do?"

"Do? Well we can pray, you and I together. The Bible promises that when two or three of God's children agree to ask for anything, God will give it to them. Now, Davie, you and I can agree to pray for a revival; we can pray here together this afternoon, and we can continue to pray, and sooner or later, you may be sure, God will answer our prayers according to our faith."

"But why is God taking our pastor when we need him so much?" objected David.

"I don't know, I am sure, unless it is because we are depending upon Brother Post instead of God to do the work. But, son, whatever the reason is, we can trust that in his hands, for he is wiser than we and knows what is best," was her cheerful reply.

"All right," was David's decision after evident reluctance; "we will go to work for a revival."

So they spent the rest of that dreary Sunday afternoon in praying and reading God's promises to his people. Mrs. Strong selected the passages, and David read them aloud to her. He soon became almost as enthusiastic as she, for his piety was genuine and he was thoroughly in earnest.

He did not hesitate about praying aloud, for she had trained them all to pray with her from their childhood.

David went out early to church that evening, with a heart full of hope. As soon as the old pastor came in, the young man went to him for a talk about what was uppermost in his mind.

"The Lord be praised," ejaculated the feeble, white-haired man. "My son, you have taught me a lesson. I have held on here longer than I ought, because I feared to let these people go. The idea of God not being able to care for his own and having to depend upon a poor creature like me! Now, I'll tell you what we had best do: announce a prayer-meeting for next Sunday morning at eleven o'clock, as there will be no preaching then. I'll get somebody to lead it, and you must invite everybody to come. I cannot remain with you, but I shall pray for God's blessing upon your efforts. In the meantime, *pray* and ask everybody else, that you believe will be in earnest, to pray with you," urged the preacher, into whom the young man's enthusiasm seemed to have infused new vigor.

After an earnest farewell sermon, he announced the prayer-meeting for the following Sunday, and urged upon them its importance.

The following Sabbath, the Strongs found seven present at the prayer-meeting, besides themselves, but all seemed depressed by the absence of the appointed leader. David, in his anxiety for success, even consented to take the place of the missing leader, to Mrs. Strong's great surprise and gratification. Before the service was over, all had become deeply interested. At Mrs. Strong's suggestion, they appointed prayer-meetings at different homes about the town, one for each night in the coming week, with one at the church on the following Sabbath at this same hour.

The next Sabbath found thirty-five or forty present and the cottage prayer-meetings had been quite successful. By the third Sabbath there were fully a hundred present at the morning prayer service, and a deep earnestness pervaded the congregation. The cottage prayer-meetings were moved to the church, for want of room in the homes for the increasing number who wished to attend. At the close of the service on this Sunday, it was proposed to invite an evangelist who was holding a meeting in an adjoining town. The following Sabbath, the evangelist, Major Penn, was with them, ready to take hold of a meeting already well prepared for his leadership.

These were wonderful days for David. He prayed as he worked, he prayed as he ate. It seemed to him that he could scarcely stop praying. His face fairly beamed with the joy of it. I doubt if any one in the town enjoyed the meeting so much as he and Mrs. Strong, but especially David. He had never been in a great revival before.

"Did they have a revival?" you ask.

Yes, and not only were the little handful of Christians revived, but the whole town was mightily stirred. A whole family was converted in a night. Old men and young ones were swept mysteriously from lives of sin into the Christ life. Fair youths and gray-haired men deep dyed with sin rose side by side to plead for the prayers of God's people. Need I add that it was a time of great and solemn rejoicing?

But the burden that lay heaviest upon David's heart was that Mona was not there. He grieved over this long after the revival closed, and continued to pray that he might also see her a Christian. By and by there stole into his heart a comforting peace concerning her. He felt that, sooner or later, he was to see her an earnest Christian, and he recognized this calm as an answer to his prayer. Then and not until then could he throw himself upon God's promises and wait patiently for the time to come.

CHAPTER XXI

THE NEW PASTOR

"MAMMA, we have called the new pastor," reported David on coming in, one Sunday evening from church.

"Did they call the young brother Trueheart?" she inquired with evident interest.

"Yes, ma'am," then turning to the girls, who had remained at home with Mrs. Strong, he laughingly said, "Girls, you will have to set your caps for him. I think you would have about equal chances, as Bess plays the organ and Maud sings in the choir. Surely one of you ought to catch such a fine young fellow as he is."

Bess blushed a little, and Maud tossed her head saying, "I don't care to set my cap for anybody. I haven't time for beaux," all of which sounded very important, for Maud was taking a business course and hoped in another year to get a position as a stenographer. Looking forward to being a business woman, she felt that she had no time to throw away upon such pastime as getting married.

Bess made no answer to David's teasing. She could not deny her little romantic dreams, for Bess was the housewife and loved nothing better than the thought of some day having a cozy little home where everything would be kept in perfect order, and, incidentally, a good-looking young husband to enjoy it with her. A very commonplace little dream, but one that has made most girls happy at some time or other.

"You might do a great deal worse than to marry some good man, Maud," said Mrs. Strong, rather disapprovingly, for the happiness of the good woman's past married life made her believe it the very best life for all women.

"Yes, ma'am, but I might do a great deal better than to marry a sorry one," responded Maud gaily.

"That is true; but I had not thought of you marrying a sorry one," replied the older woman.

"Such things have happened, haven't they, Betsy?" questioned David, pulling the blond sister's hair playfully, as he read in her face that, as usual, she thought Maud must be right.

"When will the new pastor be here?" inquired Mrs. Strong, going back to the subject most important to her. She was delighted to see her children taking so much interest in church work, and never lost an opportunity to encourage them. Nor was David's suggestion, concerning the matrimonial opportunity, displeasing to her. The young minister would probably marry. Why shouldn't it be one of her girls as well as another? Down in her heart, she hoped to see them both happily married as soon as they were old enough, though she would not have said so, any more than they would have announced that they wished to marry.

"He will be here next Saturday, and if you don't mind, I should like to bring him here to stay over Sunday, or until he gets settled. He could share my room. I like him very much," suggested David more seriously.

"Why certainly, we shall be glad to have him," declared Mrs. Strong, to whom it never occurred to be ashamed of her humble circumstances. She began at once to plan for the good man's entertainment. Of course Bess joined her plans, for they did all the housekeeping together. But Maud declined to take any share in the matter.

"You can have the parson, Bess, if you can catch him. He is not my style and I haven't time for him." Then catching sight of her sister's hurt expression at this teasing hint, she went over and kissed her penitently, saying, "He couldn't help loving you, honey, if he gets to know you well enough," which comforted Bess immediately, for nothing pleased her more than Maud's occasional petting.

To make a long story short, the minister came. He was so jolly, kind and pleasant that he not only won the Strongs, but also the whole church, and shortly had them all wide awake and humming like a beehive.

During the week he spent at the Strongs he showed an almost boyish pleasure in their home life. The second morning of his stay found him enveloped in one of Mrs. Strong's capacious cook aprons, and plying the churn dasher as vigorously as if it were the most delightful employment imaginable, while he watched the mistress of the house and her pretty assistant tidy up the kitchen.

He planned church work with David, praised Mrs. Strong's cooking, joked with Maud, but silently watched Bess, the rosy little home-maker and his faithful organist. That young lady was seized with a sudden fit of perversity, never before known in her history. Feeling that the whole family was clearly aiming her at the minister's head, she determined that she would have as little as possible to do with him, beyond her duty as organist.

Possibly the reader wonders where Bess acquired her skill in music. Mona, seeing her delight in it, had generously given her lessons during vacations. Then David, at Mona's suggestion, had procured her a small but sweet-toned cabinet organ, upon which she spent all her spare time in practice, until in a remarkably short time she could play their simple church music surprisingly well.

Of course, Frank Trueheart took an interest in the church music, and finding this the only means of approaching his organist, he must needs come regularly to help her select hymns best adapted to his sermon. The hymns being such an important part of the service, this took a good deal of time. After they were selected, he frequently found it advisable that they practice them over together, at first with Maud and David; but later these two, seeing how matters stood, escaped on one pretext or another, leaving Bess and the minister to practice alone. She realized their motive and hardened her heart against him, but she could not refuse to sing with him, so her sweet soprano voice and his rich bass harmonizing more and more pleasantly with each other and the little old organ, their practice gradually increased as the time passed. Finding it so pleasant they were loath to stop when once they began, so that from learning new hymns they soon fell into the habit of practicing both old and new ones, all gaining in beauty, to each of the two devout young people, when sung by the other. By and by he could not resist suggesting tenderly how pleasant it would be for them to share, not only their songs, but their whole lives with each other.

She was busy with the music and was not aware of her companion's mood, until she heard his pleading words and looked up to find the earnest face bending very close to her own. She sprang up, declaring incoherently that such a thing was impossible. But when he turned from her with a grave, distressed face, she suddenly discovered that he was the dearest object in her life.

In a sudden panic at the bare thought of losing him or making him unhappy, she blushingly confessed to his intense delight that she was mistaken.

Why try to describe the rose-colored path they trod? To those who have gone that way, all descriptions are inadequate. To those who have not, the description is foolish. If you have not sung with your sweetheart, dear friend, perhaps you walked and talked on summer evenings, admiring the sunsets or the stars, while secretly longing to express your happiness but finding no words. At all events, beauty and harmony were yours, it matters not by what messenger they came to you.

CHAPTER XXII

COMMENCEMENT

"MAMMA," announced David, one May morning, "I have asked for a ten days' vacation, and am going to see Mona graduate." Then as Mrs. Strong looked at him in blank surprise, he continued hastily, "Well, I haven't had a vacation in three years. I want to be there when she graduates. I am sure her father won't go, and she writes me that all the other girls have somebody coming," he declared sturdily holding his ground.

"Suppose they can't spare you," she suggested.

"They will have to. I am going," he answered calmly.

"Even if you lose your position?" she questioned anxiously.

"I think I could get another," he answered smiling at her evident anxiety; "but it will not be necessary. I am sure they can let me off for a week anyway."

"I hope so," she replied resignedly.

"I've bought me a lot of new clothes too," he continued as if anxious to confess the whole matter. "I have a new suit, hat, shoes, shirts, handkerchiefs, collars and neckties," he enumerated with evident relish.

"Why David, have you gone crazy?" she demanded, suddenly dropping into a chair as if her strength had deserted her.

"No, ma'am, but I needed them and I did not want Mona to be ashamed of me. The trip and the clothes will cost about all I have saved this year, but it doesn't matter. I had to have the clothes anyway, only I wouldn't have got them all at once."

She smiled and said, "Very well," for she recognized that his decision was made, and from past experience she knew that no amount of disapproval would materially alter his plans. "After all, the dear boy deserves it and a great deal more besides," she said to herself after she had carefully thought the matter over.

By the time the new clothes were brought home in a shining new valise, she was quite ready to admire them and take pleasure in the coming trip.

When he was dressed and bade them all goodbye on that bright first day of June, she was sure there was no handsomer young man to be found in the State than David, which opinion she confided to Maud and Bess to their great amusement and delight. They often teased her about her great pride in her big boy, which teasing she took good-naturedly, knowing that they were almost equally fond of him.

But what was her pleasure compared with David's? They did not know that he had planned and looked forward to this for a whole year. It was with keen delight that he settled himself comfortably in the car, delight that increased with every mile that swept before his fascinated gaze. He had that longing for travel that seems to possess all normal young men, yet he had traveled so little that even this short trip meant much to him. He felt a trifle awkward at first, for his knowledge of travel, like his knowledge of everything else outside of his work and his home, was made up almost entirely from the experience of others, or gained through his reading. But his awkwardness was not apparent to others. It only made him more dignified. With increasing interest he felt the mighty train sweep on. The "piney woods" with its swamps, moss and luxuriant undergrowth passed, and they were out upon the open prairie with its broad fields of growing cane, vegetables, cotton and corn in endless profusion. There came to him an overpowering sense of grandeur as he flew past all this kaleidoscopic scenery, with pretty cottages dotting the landscape, the owners in the fields hard by, with an occasional town by the way of variety. He was looking out upon all this with an impartial eye, as the throbbing, roaring train swept on like a thing of life. He felt like throwing up the car window to shout to all the barefooted boys, or wave at the pretty children who clustered smiling about the cottage doors. But the best of it all was that at the end of his journey was—Mona, and a solid week of pleasure in her presence.

By and by came the leaving of the train and the long drive in the stage on the seat with the driver, who gave him a detailed history of the country over which they were now passing.

They arrived at Independence just at dusk, and it was full two hours before David had secured lodgings, had supper, arrayed himself in all the glory of his new clothes, shamefacedly practiced wearing them before the cracked mirror in his room, and finally presented himself at the college door.

Cæsar—the ever-present body-guard for anybody belonging to *the school*, the colored genius whom everybody joked, took an interest in, and depended on for everything imaginable from a piece of furniture to the pantry key—received him at the door with as much dignity as the president himself could possibly have assumed.

"Miss Mona? Oh, yessir, she is here. Will you please step into the library, 'cause they is already company in the parlor. I'll speak to Dr. Hill, and he will have Miss Mona sent down right away."

While still speaking, he threw open the library door. He did not know that the seniors were holding their final class-meeting in the library, so how could he know that Mona, from the top of the big old library table, was making a speech which convulsed her hearers, while she gravely marched up and down the length of the table, mimicking every teacher in the faculty, by turns, skilfully weaving it all into her speech, and all the time turning upon them a face ludicrous with innocent surprise at their unnecessary merriment.

David hesitated on the threshold for one embarrassed moment, and then would have beat a hasty retreat, but Mona turned and saw him. With a quick, glad cry she called him to her. As he approached the table upon which she stood, there came vividly to his mind a vision of long ago, when Mona jumped from the gate-post into his arms. Evidently in the excitement of seeing him, she had forgotten herself and contemplated doing something of the same kind now, for she looked quite ready to spring into his arms like an impulsive child. She scarcely seemed more than a child, as she stood there in her innocent frivolity. Seeing her reckless intention in her attitude, he stepped quickly to the table and getting possession of her hands, drew her gently to the edge whence she sprang lightly to the floor. After a word to the others, she accompanied him into the hall.

"Oh, Davie!" she cried tremulously, "you cannot know how glad I am to see you!"

"And I you, little girl," was all he would trust himself to say.

"I have worked hard," she continued, "I have taken first honors, yet it seemed nobody cared. I am the only girl in the class that hasn't a father or mother here, to say nothing of brothers, sisters and cousins. Oh, you don't know how hard it was to see them so happy, and be so lonely myself! I was upon that table making a monkey of myself to entertain the girls, trying to forget how miserable I felt. I knew if I went to my room, I would bury my head in my pillow and fairly cry my eyes out."

As she stood there pouring her heartache into his ears, he could hardly resist putting his arms about her, but he dared not, though he did get possession of one small hand and pat it sympathetically. "Never mind, I did not know you cared so much, or I would have written you I was coming," he said.

"Oh, it's all right," she declared gaily as she brushed away the tears she had not been able to keep back. "Come, meet Dr. Hill; and then, if he will let us, we will take a little walk on the campus in the moonlight, and you can tell me all about everybody at home."

That moonlight stroll came near to being David's undoing. More than once the expressions of love for this innocent young creature rose to his lips, and each time the struggle to crush them back grew harder.

After two or three turns up and down the walk she turned upon him impatiently, and demanded, "Davie, what on earth is the matter with you to-night? You haven't made a sensible answer to a thing I have asked you. Now I want to know what you are thinking about."

He laughed an embarrassed laugh and stammered, "Me? I was a—a—thinking about a—my chief ambition."

She burst into a merry laugh, then said saucily,

"Now, I do think that is quite complimentary to my conversation!"

"Oh, but you don't understand," he blundered on. "You ——"

"Mona," called a voice from a window near them, "it's time to practice that duet for to-morrow."

"Oh, dear, now I have to go!" she said petulantly. "I can't see you any more until morning."

He bade her good-night at the door and hastily strode away to fight out his battle once more.

Once more duty conquered desire. "I am not able to support Mona as she has been used to living, even if I owed nothing to mamma and the girls. Mamma has the first claim on me, because she has made me all that I am, that too when she was under no obligation to me. I have no right to ask a girl to wait indefinitely for me. Oh, God," he groaned, "give me patience to wait until I am free to speak."

When Mona went to her room, a dozen of her mischievous mates awaited her. As she entered, a gay young voice called, "Where did you find him?"

"Did you say his name was Dignity?" demanded another.

"Why don't you make him quit being so stiff?" questioned a third.

Instantly Mona drew herself up to her full height, threw her head back and said in a voice whose first tone brought silence, "You may make fun of anybody else, but not Davie. He has been my friend all my life, he taught me to walk, his was the first name I learned. I never had a trouble in my life that he did not stand by me, and whoever whispers a word against him is not my friend."

One by one the girls retired in surprised silence. They had never seen Mona so angry before.

That commencement week was a delightful one to David. He met older men of the kind he had long wanted to know. He not only met them, but heard their conversations, joining in at times when they touched upon the things most interesting him. He attracted no little attention by his well-bred intelligence and his evident enjoyment of the surroundings.

Mona, seeing his pleasure, managed in one way and another to bring him in contact with the people he wished to know, and rejoiced to see them appreciate him. He was a little stiff and formal in his manner, but to those who could read the indications, he showed himself a man of promise.

David carefully avoided any more moonlight strolls with Mona, a thing easy to do, as they were not favorably looked upon by those in authority. When they took the journey home together, he left her at her own door, still without having uttered a word of the love he bore her.

Mrs. Strong was equally surprised and relieved as time passed, and she saw there was no change in Mona's and David's relations. She was a reasonable woman, and she realized that he had a right to marry. While she did not wish to be selfish, she very much hoped that David would stand by her until they together had prepared the twins to take care of themselves. Still, if David had told her he was going to marry, she would have tried not to throw any obstacles in his way.

CHAPTER XXIII

A SURPRISE

MONA had not been long at home, when her father announced very calmly at breakfast one morning, that he was going away that forenoon to be married. He expected to return with his bride a week later. Beyond informing Mona that she had not met the lady of his choice, he left her to learn everything concerning her stepmother for herself.

He requested her, in a rather commanding tone, to put the house in order for their arrival. He went on very graciously to say that Mona might keep her mother's room as it joined her own, and as the latter was quite small. He and his new wife would occupy the rooms across the hall. These he wished especially prepared for the newcomer.

Mona quietly acquiesced, being too much astonished to do otherwise, even had she so wished, until long after he was gone. Finally she rushed off to the kitchen to talk it over with mammy, who shook her head grimly and muttered dark forebodings for the future. After they had thoroughly discussed the matter, they went to work with a will, both determined that the mistress should find no fault with their housekeeping.

Mona was too indifferent to her father to be angry about this marriage. Had she loved him, as she longed to do, she would have been furious at the introduction of a third member into their family. As it was, she felt just a trifle ashamed of it, along with a mild interest at this break in the monotony. Surely it would not be much drearier than it was at present.

The new wife might prove a pleasant companion for herself. She felt that she ought to be indignant on her dead mother's account, but she was too sensible not to see that this would be ridiculous. She knew her father had never cared any more for her mother than he did now, and probably cared as little for the future Mrs. McArthur. So she wound up by being sorry for the latter, and with the intention of being as pleasant to her as that unknown lady would permit.

That was one of the busiest weeks Mona had ever spent, and it was with a sigh of relief that she at last met them at the door. She was not a little surprised at her father's choice. She had expected a young woman, perhaps almost as young as herself, who would probably go out with her and make their home gayer by entertaining the young people and having Mona join her in these pleasantries. Possibly she might have the tact to come between Mona and her father, producing a more harmonious relation.

Mona was just home from school and, missing her schoolmates sadly, she managed before the week was out to gather quite a rose-colored dream about the expected stepmother. She did not realize how much she had hoped, until she met the opposite of her desires at the door. She confronted a tall, angular, sallow woman, rather distinguished looking in spite of her undeniable homeliness. She had a peculiar way of drawing one corner of her mouth in, as if trying to bring out a dimple, and she arched her neck and tossed her head in a way that might be amusing or disgusting, the feeling produced being dependent upon how often one might see her do it. Above all she was cold looking, if possible colder in her manner than Mr. McArthur himself.

Mona wondered, as she welcomed them, and showed her stepmother to her room, what there could have been to draw these two together.

Later she discovered it was because each thought the other wealthy; but just now she had to give up the problem. She noted the older woman's critical survey of the house as she passed through it, but learning nothing from the inscrutable face, she promptly dubbed her, in her own mind, the Sphinx.

The next morning at the breakfast table, Mrs. McArthur very complacently remarked, "I shall be quite busy for the next few days putting things to rights. Of course the house had gotten sadly out of order, having no mistress for so long. A young girl cannot be expected to take the interest in such things or keep house, as a woman would."

Mona, who had managed on some excuse to turn her back a moment upon the speaker, glanced at mammy with a derisive grin, as the latter snorted and backed into the kitchen. Turning about, Mona said quite serenely, "Mammy and I thought we had things in apple-pie order," while Mr. McArthur bit his lip and frowned with vexation. The elder woman gave Mona what she intended for an indulgent smile and said, "Oh, well, you could not be expected to have the experience that *I have had*, but I shall take pleasure in teaching you." Whereupon she arched her scrawny neck and looked with greater favor at her stepdaughter, for the latter's submissive manner charmed her. Her airs almost convulsed Mona, but she managed to keep a sober face.

After breakfast they made the round of inspection together. Dirt and dust she could not find, though she did look faithfully, but Mrs. McArthur promptly condemned the open airy house and easy comfortable arrangement of furniture, as wholly lacking in dignity. The windows were closed, the furniture stiffly backed against the walls, and the shades drawn so closely that one coming in from the sunshine would need a light to keep from falling over the furniture. This completed, the new mistress expressed her complete satisfaction, and Mona fled to her own apartments for fresh air and to relieve her feelings. She flung herself into a chair, with a groan that was half laugh and half sob, then said to herself, "Dear, dear, what a delightful tomb we are going to live in!"

She went quietly about her work for the next few days, but it seemed that hers and her stepmother's tastes were destined to differ at every turn. The latter—taking this difference for ignorance on Mona's part, for of course all intelligent people agreed with Mrs. McArthur—went into elaborate explanations as to how everything should be done, until Mona, determined to keep peace, quietly confined her housekeeping to her own rooms. These rooms were soon made very attractive with some of the handsome old furniture her mother had brought from her girlhood home, and which the present Mrs. McArthur banished for that of more modern make.

When that lady's new piano came, Mona moved hers up to the little sitting-room she had made of her mother's room, and her comfort was complete.

The next time David came over, he whistled softly. "Something new, isn't it?" he suggested, nodding at the close solemn dark rooms all about him.

"Sh," whispered Mona; "come up to my sitting-room."

He accompanied her and they had a jolly half-hour; then Mrs. McArthur came in on some trifling pretext and eyed them with evident disfavor.

Mona expected a lecture, and was not disappointed. When David left, Mrs. McArthur came in with her sewing, and inquired into David's history, as she made herself comfortable for a long talk. She only nodded indefinitely and gave vent to a long-drawn out "yes," ending in a rising inflection, which Mona had noticed she always used when not wishing to express herself; after Mona explained that David was such an intimate friend of so long standing. When Mona was quite through, she received quite a lengthy lecture upon the impropriety of young ladies inviting gentlemen into their private sitting-rooms.

"Oh, but he is like my own brother," declared Mona decidedly, and there the matter rested.

Some months passed before there was an open rupture between these two widely different women, and that, as might have been expected, was over mammy.

Now it was quite natural for mammy to look upon Mona as the rightful mistress of the house, and the new mistress as an intruder, yet, though natural, it was not a wise policy, for the new mistress was a woman who did not forget indignities, and only bore mammy's opposition with apparent patience until she felt secure in an effort to discharge her. She began by remarking occasionally, when alone with her husband, on mammy's incompetence, her wastefulness, and the fact that she would some day become helpless on their hands. Mr. McArthur paid little heed to these remarks at first, but gradually came to acquiesce in his wife's view and finally, as she had intended, suggested that they would have to get rid of mammy and procure a younger servant.

Mona knew nothing of all this. She was really fonder of mammy than of her father, if she would have admitted it, and Mrs. McArthur fully enjoyed the fact that she was striking a blow at Mona as well as mammy.

A few days after Mr. McArthur's suggestion, mammy rebelled against the authority of the new mistress for the last time. That lady arched her neck and dismissed the old negress with a great display of injured dignity. The poor old ashen face was pitiful to see. She had never worked for any one else, and her love for Mona was almost equal to that for her own child. Of course, she fled to Mona for protection, and the latter came down the stairs like a whirlwind and was upon her stepmother before that discreet woman could realize what had happened. She listened to the girl's indignant outburst with calm triumph, until she was quite through, then after coldly stating the facts, as she saw them, turned and left the room.

An hour later, with a grim smile on her face, she watched Mona drive off with mammy. The indignant girl took her faithful old servant to the house of an old friend, who was only too glad to procure the latter's service. The rest of the day Mona spent in helping mammy to move, and in making her comfortable in her new quarters. That night she sat down in her own room, more lonely than she had ever been before.

After this encounter little passed between the two women. Mona went out more, took less interest in the home, and saw less and less of her stepmother, until one day she overheard some one say to the latter, "You and Mona must be so much company to each other." At which Mrs. McArthur laughed her frozen little company laugh (she seldom laughed except for company) and answered, "Mona is *very* peculiar. Do you know, I scarcely ever see her except at meals. I have tried to be a mother to her, but really I suppose she has been alone so much that she prefers it. So I never intrude upon her."

At hearing this, Mona's face darkened with anger, but presently the ludicrous side of the problem struck her, as it usually did, and she speedily arrived at this charitable conclusion,

"I guess she is a good enough woman, in her way, but we just simply don't agree in our opinion of anything." Which theory she confided to David the next time they had one of their chats.

He sympathized with her more than he would admit, for he thought best to make light of their differences as much as possible. How inexpressibly he longed to carry her away from these unpleasant surroundings to a little home of his own, no one but himself knew. He did not go to see her as often as he had been in the habit of doing. He felt that Mrs. McArthur did not approve of his visits, besides Mona had become quite a society girl now and was away from home a great deal. She seemed gay and cheerful in spite of the unpleasant conditions in her home, and David, believing that she enjoyed going out so much more than their old quiet evenings at home, left her to her own way, while he filled his leisure with the society of Frank Trueheart and their church work. It made him sad to think how far his and Mona's aims were apart, but he put this from him as much as possible, hoping and praying for the day when she should come to the great change of heart that meant a change of life.

He had no way of knowing that she often longed for him to come, on the occasional lonely evenings that she spent at home; that she often wearied of parties and wanted him to come as in the old childhood days, but the time was long past when she could call him at pleasure. She did not dream that she was continually in his thoughts, though her loyalty kept her from accusing him of forgetting her.

They still held to their Sunday afternoon chats, however, and one subject of great interest to both was the courtship of Frank Trueheart and Bess.

CHAPTER XXIV

CHANGES

IT was the beginning of autumn when the young minister gained the coveted promise of Bess to become his wife. After he was gone she went and knelt at Mrs. Strong's feet, and with her blushing face buried in the latter's lap, she told them all of her happiness. David promptly congratulated her and praised her lover until she forgot her timidity in her delight at having him liked. Mrs. Strong caressed her silently, but one look into the older woman's face told Bess that her mind had gone back to her own young days. Maud was the last to speak or show her pleasure in her sister's happiness, but she wound up by saying, " I can't help feeling a little jealous, honey, at having him come between us."

" Oh, don't feel that way. I want you to love him, too. Wouldn't it be nice if we could both marry him," said Bess hugging her sister.

" No, I don't believe I want to," replied Maud after the general laugh had subsided.

" I don't see how you can help it," answered

Bess, then blushed again, and hid her face on her sister's shoulder. By and by she told them that she and Frank wished to marry in the spring, timidly adding, "Of course, if mamma is willing."

Preparations were at once begun for the wedding and went steadily forward through the Christmas holidays.

One rainy evening in January, David came home about dark and went around to the kitchen to dry his damp clothing. He knew from the column of smoke issuing from the kitchen chimney that the dear mother was thinking of her boy and cooking him a good hot supper after his day's work. Sure enough, there she was, plump, neat and smiling him a genial welcome from the midst of sundry savory odors that were very inviting to a tired hungry toiler. As he stood talking by the fire, taking in the comfort and giving out content in every possible way, his face suddenly changed and he exclaimed, "Why, mamma, I have a letter for you from California. Who can be the writer?" As he talked he anxiously rummaged in his pockets, presently handing it over with evident curiosity.

"I don't know, I am sure," she answered, anxiously, adjusting her glasses, "unless it is from my sister. She moved to California some years ago, and I have never heard from her since."

She took the letter, examined the envelope carefully, guessed about it, in short prolonged the delightful mystery until David, standing on one foot in a vain attempt to dry the other, suggested, with twinkling eyes, that she might find out what she wished to know by opening it. But the twinkle died out of the dark eyes and they became as grave as the rest of his face, when she read him the letter. It was from her sister, sure enough. The latter had become a confirmed invalid, and wrote begging Mrs. Strong to make her home with her. She wanted her to come as soon as convenient. There was no haste. Her malady was not dangerous, yet she would probably never be well again, and craved the companionship of her only sister. No expense would be spared to make this sister comfortable, for she and her husband were well-to-do and childless.

After the letter was finished, David was silent, but watched Mrs. Strong anxiously all the evening. She gave him a reply to mail for her the next day, and her reassuring smile made him easier.

A few evenings later, David sat alone with Mrs. Strong, reading aloud to her as she sewed. Presently he laid aside his book and said, "Mamma, I want Bess to have nice things for her wedding. She has always been a good little sister to me, always willing to deny herself to help along, and I want her always to feel that she had everything she wanted when she married."

"But, Davie, I can't let her take what little you have laid up for that," remonstrated Mrs. Strong anxiously, for the means to purchase the remainder of the modest trousseau were troubling her no little.

"I won't have to take that," he answered promptly. "We are rushed with work just now, and they made me a good offer yesterday to help for awhile at night. I was glad to do it, for it would give me more to spend in this way."

Mrs. Strong protested against this, fearing such close continued work would affect his health. But David urged it, saying that he had already promised his services, and it would be a great disappointment to him not to use it as he had planned. So Mrs. Strong gave in, with some misgivings as to the wisdom of such a course. He would not let her tell Bess that, after working all day for the family, he was working half the night for her.

"She is so conscientious that she would not be happy if she knew it; don't spoil her happiness," he urged.

So the dear girl wondered, as she worked and sang from morning until night, why David worked so late, but she enjoyed her pretty things without connecting the two at all. When she feebly protested against such an abundance, as she sometimes did, for it seemed lavish to her, Mrs. Strong always replied, "David wants you to have it, dear," and rejoiced to see her daughter so happy, though she anxiously noticed that David was beginning to look care-worn and thin.

Mona was much consulted in these days, and gave valuable help with the dainty things, dear to every feminine heart, slyly contributing a pretty ribbon or bit of lace, now and then, under the plea that it matched so well, or that she had bought the last there was in town, and did not really need it. She did not see fit to add that she had bought it for this very purpose.

Bess looked up to Mona and admired her very much, to Maud's disgust. The latter resented David's devotion to Mona, and persuaded herself it was not appreciated, and thought his admiration quite enough to waste, without adding hers and Bess's.

By and by there came another letter from California. David put it in his pocket with dread (at the post-office) and could hardly bring himself to deliver it to its proper owner when he reached home. Sure enough it caused great excitement. After a stormy family counsel in which Bess cried, Maud could not tell what she wanted, and David walked the floor protesting vigorously, Mrs. Strong decided to accept her sister's offer, which was a position in her husband's office for Maud, and a home for both Maud and Mrs. Strong with them, where Mrs. Strong would practically be the mistress of her invalid sister's house.

After the girls had retired, David came home from work and again pleaded with her to change her decision.

"My son," she finally said, "Bess will soon be married and will not greatly need me; this is an opportunity for Maud that she cannot afford to lose; my sister needs me more than either of you. As to you, I think you have supported this family long enough, and should be left free to do something for yourself."

"I haven't complained, have I?" he questioned a trifle savagely.

"No, dear, nor do I think you would; but you have a right to your ambitions, and by and by to a wife and home of your own. I don't want you to give all of your young life to me," she answered.

"You gave yours to us," he persisted.

"Yes, but not until I had had my married happiness to carry as a pleasant memory through my life. You are young, David. You will want to marry before many years. I would not come between you and your happiness for anything."

Here it rested; no amount of persuasion could move her. The wedding preparations were hastened a little; the little old home was sold, to be vacated after the wedding. The modest sum it brought was divided among them. Mrs. Strong gave Bess her portion to help furnish the new parsonage, which the church was building, put aside her own and Maud's share for the journey to California, and gave David his to take a vacation trip upon, insisting that he needed it very much, he was getting so worn and thin. He did not want to accept it, but Mrs. Strong became so offended, that he made haste to appease her indignation, and meekly took all she offered.

The wedding was at the church, for Frank Trueheart wanted his entire flock to have a share in his great happiness. After the wedding, the family adjourned to the new parsonage, where some of the good women of the church had spread a veritable feast, which Bess laughingly declared was sufficient for them to live on through their entire honeymoon. Bess had begged Mona to come, but the latter, knowing that it was strictly a family affair, had discreetly pleaded a previous engagement, feeling that they would prefer being alone just before their nearing separation.

The supper over, David, who had moved to his new lodgings only that afternoon, escorted Mrs. Strong and Maud to the train, making them promise over and over again that if at any time they needed him or his assistance they would let him know. Then the train came roaring in and bore them away from him. The parting had been sad for them all, but Mrs. Strong and Maud were going to new scenes and still had each other to cling to, while Bess had her devoted young husband to comfort her and make her happy. David felt very much alone as the train vanished from his sight, and he wandered disconsolately back to the little old home, dark, bare and desolate. From there his thoughts turned to Mona for comfort, as Mrs. Strong well knew they would. Suddenly there came a decision to propose to her that night. Surely he needed her, possibly she needed him. Yes, he was free to go to her and tell her his secret at last.

CHAPTER XXV

HOW DAVID PROPOSED

DAVID was met at the door by Mrs. McArthur, who icily told him that Mona had gone to a party at Mrs. Page's and would not be back until late.

He smiled grimly to himself, as he tramped across to the Pages', over the evident disapproval Mrs. McArthur had of him. He could afford to smile, for he knew that her opinion would not affect Mona's, except to make her like him better. David was quite thin from overwork and anxiety. He looked a trifle stern on account of the loneliness tugging at his heart, but his face was flushed with suppressed excitement, while in his eyes there glowed a purpose.

This was the hour for which he had so long waited, and now he longed to tell Mona his chief ambition. He wanted her to comfort him and drive away his loneliness. He pictured in his mind, as he strode along, how he would take her away from the party.

He reveled in the joy of the long walk home, and how he would pour into her ears his love and longing for her to share his whole life.

He found her standing with a half-dozen young men around her, gaily entertaining them all with her bright repartee and contagious smiles. He went boldly up to her and asked to see her a few moments alone. She took his arm and with a laughing excuse to the rest, suffered him to lead her away.

Giving him a quick glance, as they crossed the room, she thought she had never seen him so handsome. His face was flushed, his eyes bright, and he was so erect and masterful. But why did he wear that odious cape jasmine in his buttonhole? Its rich fragrance sickened her and brought a rush of painful memories.

He led her to a vine-covered nook on the veranda, and after seating her he settled himself beside her. She waited a moment for him to speak, then asked, expectantly, "What is it?"

"Why, I wanted to talk to you. I haven't had a chance for some time, you know," he declared contentedly smiling into the sweet puzzled face beside him, as he admired it in the soft light coming through the window of a deserted adjoining room.

"Well, if I ever heard anything to equal that!" she ejaculated laughing, "but I want to talk to you too," she presently continued, "and I have something sure enough to tell you, though I was beginning to fear you had lost interest in me."

"Why, Mona!" his face was close to hers now, and his voice was tenderly reproachful.

"Oh, I was joking about that, but I do want to tell you," she replied without looking into the face that, had she seen it, would have told its own story.

"All right, let's hear about it," he answered, feeling so contented that he did not care how long this state of affairs lasted.

"Davie," she spoke in a low even tone, "I have decided to get married."

She spoke as indifferently as if she had said, "I am going shopping to-morrow." It made him turn cold with dread. Mona was no longer a whimsical romantic schoolgirl, she was a woman now, and, as she went on in her even deliberate tones, he was filled with a sick sense of hopelessness.

"Who is the lucky man?" he inquired with dry lips.

"It's papa's partner, Mr. Flint. I don't care much about him, but then I don't dislike him, and I guess he will do as well as any. I don't think I could ever really love any man, and things couldn't be more unpleasant for me than they are now. He asked me two weeks ago, and papa called me into the parlor the next day to tell me he hoped I'd marry him, that he was a good business man and it would be nice to keep the business all in the family, and—my patience, Davie, why don't you say something ? " demanded Mona, who could not endure his silence an instant longer.

" Very well," he answered furiously, " I'll say this. You shan't marry him ! Of all the cold-blooded business transactions, this is the coldest. I didn't think you would stoop to such a marriage. I would rather see you in your coffin than see you go into such a miserable business."

She stood up, aghast at his fury, then sweeping him a low bow said in a clear tone, " Mr. Strong, I shall marry whom I please, without your let or hindrance."

She was sweeping by him with high head and flashing eyes, when he caught her wrist in his hot hand and held it like a vice.

" Good-bye, Mona," he said with parched lips, " I am going away soon. I know you will be unhappy and I will be powerless to help it. I fear, if I saw it, I should want to kill the man who made you so." He paused a moment, then his voice softened and broke, "Little girl, I have loved you every day of your life. For years I have worked and waited for you. As soon as I was free to speak, I came straight to ask you to be my wife."

She gazed at him in a dazed, bewildered way, and he caught her face fiercely between his hands. "If you won't be my wife, I *will* tell you good-bye, cost what it may," he whispered and pressing his hot lips to her forehead, for an instant, he gently released her, and before she could find her voice he had vanished into the night. She sprang to the edge of the veranda to recall him, but the man whom she had declared she would marry stepped in front of her and asked angrily, "Pray, what does all this mean?"

"Nothing," she answered sullenly.

"I wasn't aware that you and Mr. Strong were so fond of each other, until I happened upon this little scene," he snarled.

She tilted her chin a trifle higher but made no answer.

He waited a moment for her to speak, then as she remained silent, he continued: "I must insist that, as my promised wife, your future conduct shall be more dignified, to say the least. As to young Strong, I prefer that you have nothing more to do with him. I do not consider him our equal, in the first place, and, in the second, he seems inclined to too great familiarity."

He was evidently through now and waiting for her reply, so she answered promptly, "I retain the right to select my own friends, and I tell you distinctly, David Strong has been like a brother to me, and I wouldn't give up his friendship for you nor any other man I ever knew."

"His parting just now was exceedingly brotherly, I confess, and I must insist that you choose between us, Miss McArthur," he retorted.

"Very well, Mr. Flint, that is just with you," she replied haughtily, and slipping his ring from her finger she dropped it into his extended hand and was gone before he could argue further.

"She will make up all right when she cools off. I didn't know she was so hot-headed. But I won't have him hanging around her, that's certain," he reflected, savagely.

Back in the parlor, she was the gayest of the gay, until passing Harry Saunders, she whispered, "Harry, please take me home. I have the blues."

"Of course," agreed good-natured Harry with alacrity. "What's the matter, you and Dave had a fuss?" he questioned curiously.

"Please don't ask me," she begged so piteously that he promptly agreed and began talking about something else. When she was at last alone in her own room, she flung herself across the bed sobbing, "Oh, Davie, if you had only told me, I would have waited until you were free, even if it had been years. Oh, dear, if I had only known!"

By and by she grew calmer, and comforted herself by planning how she would see David in the morning and tell him of her quarrel with Mr. Flint. She knew that would be sufficient. Davie could take care of the rest, and her face burned in the darkness as she pressed her hand upon her forehead, where his lips had touched. How she would have resented such a liberty in Mr. Flint! Yet it seemed Davie's right. How could she have been so blind to all his faithfulness through her whole life? And yet, that was just it; his unvarying devotion was what had kept her in ignorance. She could think of numberless evidences of his intentions, now that her eyes were opened. She wondered at the joy that filled her at thought of his love. She suddenly found her restlessness gone. She felt so secure and safe. Her life had a purpose at last. This was all so different from her feeling for Mr. Flint, whom she could not bear to come too close to her, or for poor Ralph Martin, who had only awakened a childish, pitying love.

Next she reproached herself for having made David even more unhappy on this sad night of parting from his family. She longed for morning to come that she might make it right with him. They would be happy too, happier than she had ever dreamed she could be. They would be married as she had seen happy little Bess married to-night, and have a dear little home of their own. She was glad Davie was poor. He should have all she had, and then she would help him all she could besides. As she lay there busy with these thoughts, she heard the midnight train come in. Presently a pistol shot rang out on the still night air, the new town clock struck twelve, then the train went out, puffing and blowing as though overflowing with its own importance. She discovered that she must have come home from the party earlier than usual. Gradually the town quieted to rest; everything grew quiet but a rat thumping about in the attic overhead and the ticking of the little clock on her mantel. By the time the rat grew quiet she too was sound asleep, with a smile of hope for the morrow parting her innocent lips.

She did not wake until the sun was shining full in her face, and she sprang up with a start. There seemed to be something unusual going on downstairs, for the sound of hurrying feet, opening and shutting of doors, and the rustle of her stepmother's dress on the stairs outside her door, all indicated some excitement. She dressed hurriedly and went down to find out the cause. At a glance she saw that her father was unusually agitated; her stepmother eyed her curiously, as she stood in the doorway, but said nothing.

Her father glanced up from his seat at the breakfast-table, with evident vexation and remarked, "Sam Flint was shot last night."

It always angered Mr. McArthur for anything to interfere with his plans. Although Flint had been his faithful employee for years before he became his partner, yet it was evident that the derangement of his own affairs was troubling him more than his junior partner's sufferings.

At her father's remark, Mona dropped suddenly into her seat. She knew that she had turned pale from the chilly, tingling sensation that swept over her, and from that cold, fixed scrutiny of Mrs. McArthur.

"Who shot him? When was he shot? Was it fatal?" she gasped all in a breath.

"It is not known who shot him; it occurred about midnight, and the wound is not considered serious," was her father's deliberate response as he gave her a keen glance and thought, "She is evidently very much interested in Flint."

"He sent me a note a half-hour ago, and asks that you will come to see him this morning," continued Mr. McArthur.

Though Mona's eyes were fixed upon her plate, she knew that both of them were watching her, until feeling that she could bear it no longer, she rose hastily saying, "Please excuse me. I do not care for any breakfast," and started to leave the room.

"You had better change your dress and go with me to see Flint," her father suggested. "I shall go by on my way to the office."

"I—I—oh, it is too early for me to go yet," she faltered.

"I can go down with her later," suggested Mrs. McArthur in a tone of elation that made Mona shudder, in spite of herself, as she thought of taking such a spy upon her actions with her anywhere.

"I cannot go," said the girl positively.

"What! And pray why not?" her father demanded in a low angry tone, then continued: "Are you not engaged?"

"No, sir," she answered firmly, bracing herself for what must follow.

"What does this mean?" he questioned.

"It means that I do not care enough for Mr. Flint to marry him," she answered, looking fearlessly into her father's eyes, "and that we decided last night to break our engagement."

"You mean that you quarreled, and you let that hot temper of yours run away with your sense. There is no earthly reason for this foolishness. Flint is one of the most promising young men in this place, and most girls would jump at the chance of marrying him," declared her father, losing his temper more and more over this evident frustration of his plans.

"There is no reason, except that I do not care enough for him to wish to spend my life with him," answered the girl listlessly, knowing that this sentiment would meet with small favor in her father's eyes.

"Nonsense!" snorted he. "You can live with anybody if you will behave yourself. This marriage would be to your advantage as well as mine and Flint's. I wish you to go to see him. He evidently wishes to make up."

"But I do not wish to. It is not necessary for me to marry if I do not desire it. I am of age, have a home and a living from my mother, and shall not marry unless I find some one I really care for," she answered haughtily, determined to let her father know her decision was made. She saw him turn white with rage, and hastily left the room before anything more unpleasant could be said, for after all, this was her father, and together they shared this home.

As she hurried to her room there came a dreadful thought into her mind which made her turn faint with dread. She tried to drive it away, but it intruded only the more. Over and over there raced through her brain the words, "I know you will be unhappy. I fear if I saw it I should want to kill the man who made you so."

She experienced a sense of relief at the thought that she was not under the gaze of her lynx-eyed stepmother, when this fear occurred to her.

She rushed into her own room and closed the door upon her misery. Burying her face in her hands, she sobbed to herself, "Oh, Davie, what made you say that to me? I know you didn't do it, but I can't keep those words out of my mind."

Presently she bathed her face to obliterate the traces of her tears, put her rooms in order and carefully dressed herself for the street. She had heard the front door close after her father some time ago, and now she went quietly out. Had she looked back when she reached the gate, she might have seen Mrs. McArthur cautiously watching her through the half-closed blinds of her bedroom window. That designing woman was anxious for this marriage. She was shrewd enough to know that her own management was unpleasant to Mona, and she knew that the latter would insist upon a home of her own if she married. As for herself, she was as anxious to be rid of Mona as Mona was of her. But she knew that Mona could not be summarily disposed of, as mammy had been.

"She has given in. It would have been better if she had asked me to accompany her, but then she is peculiar," and Mrs. McArthur set her thin bloodless lips together in a way that was not pleasant to see, but this was not an expression that she showed in company.

Mona walked rapidly down the street. She felt that she must see David. She had quite forgotten the fact that she had also quarreled with him. All of her life she had depended upon him for counsel, and now, more than ever in her life, she felt that she needed him and could go to him unreservedly, since she knew of his great love for her. She was his and he hers, that was sufficient. So completely had she become his, that had he suggested when she marched into the office that they go and be married at once, she would have promptly agreed. In fact, she rather hoped he would do this, and thus put an end to the struggle between her and her father.

No one would think strangely of her going to the dry-goods store, which opened into the office where David worked. Besides, she and David were very often together, she had frequently stopped by the office to see him a moment, and their friends looked upon them almost as brother and sister.

When she reached the office David was not in. After a moment's hesitation, she walked up to his employer's desk and timidly asked for him. Now this good man had his own ideas about these two young people, and looked at her with evident surprise when she asked for David.

"Did you not know that he went away last night for a month's vacation?" he inquired, pushing his glasses back and eyeing her curiously.

She clutched the desk and drew a long breath before she could muster courage to ask, "Where has he gone?"

The man looked blank for a moment before he replied, "I did not think to ask him. He came to me in a great hurry, after eleven o'clock last night; said he wasn't well and had decided to go off on the midnight train for a month's rest. He needed it too, for he looked all broken down, and no wonder. We have just finished up the biggest rush of work we ever had. I was glad for him to have a vacation. Well, we had several little matters to attend to and had no time to talk. I am satisfied that I will hear from him in a few days, however. When I do, I'll let you know."

She thanked him and went quietly out with a heavy heart. The happiness that had so suddenly come to her was as suddenly crushed. Just as she had discovered some one who could truly share her whole life, had found the sweetness of such love and companionship, the companionship was gone, and she was left hungering for the joy of which she had only caught a glimpse. The things that she had heretofore cared for seemed suddenly to have shriveled away, and left her nothing to fill the dreary void of her life. David was gone, and down in her heart was a foreboding that he did not intend to return. He would not have bidden her such a startling farewell, had he intended coming back at the end of the month. Her one hope was, that he would write to his employer resigning his position. If the latter gave her his address, she could easily write him a letter that would insure his coming. Then the cruel suspicion returned that had come to her on hearing Mr. Flint was shot. She despised herself for thinking of it, and yet she could not put it from her mind.

On her way home, she passed in sight of her father, and he promptly congratulated himself that she had so easily given in and gone to see Flint. He rubbed his hands together softly, a way he had when pleased, and went on about the business in hand.

Mona was not the only one to whom the ugly suspicion of David came. The succeeding day after his departure some one suggested the possibility of his having shot Flint, because of a quarrel with Mona McArthur. By night there were all kinds of rumors afloat, while the officers were telegraphing up and down the railroads trying vainly to learn something of his whereabouts. He had bought a ticket to St. Louis; that was all they could learn. Excitement ran high in the town over the shooting and its possible outcome. Mona found the public interest in herself and her movements made her unpleasantly conspicuous, and so remained closely at home, though this latter was not a pleasant place to stay just now. Mr. McArthur learned that she had not been to see Flint, and she was treated by him and his wife as an utter stranger.

On the third day after David's departure, a Mr. Ford, who had known David for years, came home and put an effectual stop to the search for that individual. He had been on the train talking to David when they heard the pistol shot. He promptly gave his evidence that David had nothing to do with it. After this the town settled down, the officers began a quiet search for a clue, and Mona soon found time hanging heavy on her hands.

She was tired of society, it was not necessary for her to earn her living, and there was now no employment which particularly interested her, since her stepmother had assumed entire management of the house.

She assiduously practiced her music, read a number of books, made numerous unnecessary garments, all just to pass the time. But when she thought of spending the rest of her life in this monotonous fashion, with nothing to look forward to, nothing to live for, her heart sank within her. Perhaps she would have grown desperate, but down in her heart she carefully nursed a feeble hope that David would return. So she grew to watching for him, from week to week and month to month. But at last the hope began to fade in spite of her nursing, and life daily grew drearier to the poor lonely girl.

CHAPTER XXVI

DAVID'S QUEST

WHEN David left Mona it seemed to him fitting that he should rush out into the darkness, for everything was correspondingly dark within him. The thing that he had kept before him as one of the main objects of his life, ever since he could remember, had been suddenly snatched from him. All his most cherished hopes lay in ruins, and just now other plans seemed impossible. For once his cool deliberation had deserted him. He felt weary and sick. What Mrs. Strong had suggested was quite right, he had worked too hard and needed rest. He thought of this and also remembered that his employer could spare him better now than any other time, for the busy season was just over. There was upon him a desperate haste to do something. He determined to go away for a change. This decision reached, he planned to go next morning. Then it occurred to him, "Why not go to-night?" He surely could not be so lonely among strangers as he felt now, where it seemed that everybody who cared for him had gone away and left him alone. Somehow there came to him the word, " Mother." He wanted to shout it across the years that intervened between him and his childhood. Yes, he wanted his mother. He wanted to lay his tired head upon her knee and let her soothe him to rest. He had always intended to seek for his people some day. Why not now? There seemed nothing else left for him to care for.

" Oh, God," he prayed desperately, " let me find my mother, it doesn't matter how."

He hurried to his employer's office, quickly made the necessary arrangements, rushed to his boarding-house, spoke to the landlady, snatched up the valise that had not been unpacked and flew to catch the midnight train. He had given no thought as to where he should go. He was going to find his mother, that was all he had decided upon.

At the depot, his eyes fell upon a circular describing the particular attractiveness of St. Louis. He thought that as good a start as any, and so bought a ticket for St. Louis, and flung himself on the train, with a sigh of relief. It occurred to him, that he could go somewhere else after he had finished his search in that city. He met Mr. Ford and talked with him until the train started, but not of his own plans. Presently the latter, catching a glimpse of a man he wished to see, in another car, excused himself and went away, to David's great relief. He wanted to be alone. He felt confused and weary after the night's excitement, and how could he know that this conversation was destined to rescue him from the accusation of attempted murder?

He slept and woke to find it daylight. Things looked queer, but he attributed that to the motion of the train. He had an intolerable pain in his head and he could not hold his hands steady. There was only one person sitting near him, a young man apparently about his own age, who tried to start a conversation with him; but somehow it did not seem to progress well and he went away to talk to some one else. The thought of food was nauseating to David, but he was devoutly thankful that the water was near him, for he felt as if he could never get his throat cool and moist again. By and by he decided that everybody was staring at him, the noise of the train became almost unbearable, and he longed to slip away where he could be quiet. At length the weary day drew to a close and he hoped that at last he was to be allowed to rest. But the train had only stopped for supper, and presently lurched on. Now there was added the glare of the lamps, beside which the daylight had been pleasant. Adding this to the old rattle and roar of the train, which he had endured by day, it finally became fixed in his poor fever-stricken brain that the whole thing was for his especial torture, and the people around him were there simply to witness his misery. In the middle of the next forenoon they reached a stirring little town on the western bank of the Mississippi. He did not know where he was, but suddenly decided that this was his opportunity to escape while every one else was so busy. He looked out of the car window to where a deep quiet shade lay and determined to go there and lie down. He was sure it must be cool there, and hoped to be quiet once more. He went nervously to the rear door, and finding the crowd all busy on one side, he crept unsteadily down the steps and around a corner out of sight of the train, holding with all his strength to his valise.

After he had recovered from his fear of being caught, he could not remember the direction of the shade and wandered slowly down the street. By and by the street seemed much quieter, and then he was stopped by a sudden exclamation, and looking around, beheld an old white-haired negro man standing with open mouth, staring at him.

"Ef you hain't Marse David, hit shorely is his ghos'!" declared the old fellow trembling. As David looked him full in the face, he gasped, "'Fore de Lawd, hit's my missie's baby done come back at las'. Come right in, honey, missie done been a waitin' fer you a mighty long time."

David was too sick to think strange of anything. The shade trees, the rose hedge, the broad smooth walks and the big stone house seemed to invite him to peace and repose. He entered the low gate and followed the old negro submissively up to the house.

"Oh, missie!" shouted the cracked old voice, "you cain't guess who's come."

A placid white-haired woman came to the door at the faithful old servant's call, but when she looked carefully at the clear-cut fever flushed face, she caught her breath and came unsteadily to meet him, asking huskily, "Where did you find him, Bill? How do you know that it is my boy?"

"Jes' listen to dat. Who said it was her boy?" chuckled the delighted Bill. But, for once, she had forgotten Bill. Gently she led David in, her heart fluttering so that she could scarcely breathe. She began asking him questions, which he answered, rather vaguely perhaps, but bringing hope to her hungry heart. Presently his head dropped a little and he murmured politely, "I am sorry, but I fear I shall have to lie down. You don't know how tired I am."

"Please might I look at your arm first? I know it is a strange request, but it means so much to me," she begged in a trembling voice.

He nodded, and deftly slipping back his sleeve, she found the clear-cut five-pointed star, an ugly little white scar, but to her most beautiful. Her eyes filled as she bent and kissed it. Then slipping her arms about him she sobbed, "My boy, oh, my boy! I have waited and prayed for this hour!"

He did not understand, but his head dropped forward and rested at last upon his mother's knee, as he drifted out upon the great sea of unconsciousness.

Presently she realized how ill he was, then such preparations for his comfort as went forward! With the help of the cook, he was taken up-stairs, given a bath and put to rest in a great snowy bed which must have been a comfort, though he was past appreciating it. The family physician was called, and the mother settled herself to fight the battle against death and nurse her wanderer back to health. She sat for hours listening to talk of the mill, mamma, Bess, Maud, and the never ending struggle with the columns of figures. But the word most upon his lips was Mona, sometimes in gentle patient reproof, but always with tender reverence, "Mona, Mona!"

At first she wondered who it could be; then she learned that it was the woman he loved, and it made her heart ache to hear the hungry longing of his heart poured out in this helpless way.

The three brothers received the news as one might have expected. Richard turned deadly pale for an instant; then a look of great relief spread over his face, and he rejoiced with all sincerity that the boy had come home. Hugh said nothing; but when he learned that his own brother, of whom he had so long heard, was in the house, the eagerness on his face was pitiful to see. Yet he could never see him, the handsome man whom he would be so proud to call brother.

Giddings received the news like the forty-year-old child that he was. No sadness clouded his brow. He went about the house, softly chuckling to himself. When he could contain it no longer, he rushed out and told every chance passer-by that, "Little Davie has done come home." When first told, he was eager to rush straight up and see "the little boy." Martha Preston could hardly restrain him, as she patiently explained to him that he might kill Davie if he disturbed him now. At the mention of death, the poor simple fellow shuddered, and meekly sat down upon the stair where he remained like a faithful watch dog for full ten minutes; for to his poor darkened mind nothing was so fearful as the word death. He crept restlessly about the house all afternoon, always coming to his stepmother with some question about Davie, whenever she had occasion to leave the sick room.

Weeks passed and the spring was almost gone, when the doctor at last pronounced David out of danger, and Martha Preston came down pale and smiling to tell them the good news.

Giddings rushed away to proclaim to all who would listen, "Say, did you know little Davie was a gettin' well?"

Hugh went into the parlor, and flinging himself face down in a quiet corner, prayed out of a full heart, while Richard sprang on his horse and rode restlessly about the big farm. But the happy mother went back patiently to watch and pray for the return of health.

As his strength came back, David told his story by littles, or listened to his mother's history of waiting for his return. Bill sat by, faithfully serving them both, silently biding his time to tell David that part of his story that his missie had never heard.

One morning, Richard, who always slept late, heard voices in David's room, which was next to his. The open windows of both rooms were side by side, and he could hear quite distinctly every word that passed between David and Uncle Bill. The elder brother lay drowsily listening without at first realizing that he did so. Presently he heard his own name, coupled with that of his dead brother, John. Then before he had time to consider what he was doing, he heard Bill tell David the whole story of the latter's disappearance, with the parts John and Richard were supposed to have played in the affair, all just as Bill had heard it, years ago, from " the man who drove the wagon."

When they were through, Richard had rapidly dressed himself and quietly packed a valise. These preparations completed, he slipped quietly downstairs. While eating his breakfast, he told his stepmother that he found it necessary to go on a business trip, which would probably detain him for some time. He bade her good-bye, left a message for David whom he expressed a desire not to disturb so early in the morning, and gaily asked Giddings what he should bring him on his return.

"This is a very sudden trip, is it not, Richard?" inquired Martha Preston, as she sipped her tea.

"No, ma'am," he answered, politely; "I have been wanting to go for some time, but have been waiting for David to get better before I left."

This was partially true, for Richard always wanted to go somewhere.

"You see I can leave you now with a clear conscience," he continued cheerfully, "since David is here, because I am sure he will make a better head of the house than I can ever possibly be."

After this speech, he bade them all good-bye again with one of his sunny, happy-go-lucky smiles, so free from all responsibility, and departed, to remain out of the way until he was sure of their forgiveness for his part in David's misfortune.

Had he remained in his room a few minutes longer, he would probably not have found it necessary to go away. But his light nature could not bear any one's displeasure, and he did not hear

David say after Bill had finished his story, "I am glad you never told my mother, Uncle Bill. I don't want you ever to tell her. There would be nothing to gain by her knowing it. Richard doesn't seem to be so bad as he is weak. Possibly she could not forgive him, if she knew his part in her sufferings, and I don't want us to add that bitterness to her other troubles."

"All right, Marse David, I'll sholy be glad not to tell it, 'cause I'm feared missie would be mad at me fer not tellin' her at fust," replied the old darky in a relieved tone.

"Uncle Bill, mother's been telling me how good you have been to her all these years. Now if there is anything you ever need, that I can do for you, I want you to be sure to let me know," said David, giving the wrinkled old black face a grateful look.

"I am sholy much obliged to you, Marse David, but missis hev tuk keer of old Bill. She's got a notion that I'se one of de bes' fren's she got and she sho is good to me."

"I expect she has about the right notion," replied David smiling.

"But Marse David," continued Bill hesitatingly, "there's one thing missie is mighty sot about."

"What is it, Bill?" the young man inquired.

"Well, she sho is sot 'bout chawin' terbacker. She don't never want me to spend no money she gives me for chawin' terbacker, but 'tween me an' you an' the bed post thar, hit's 'cause she never did learn what a comfort it is to a feller."

"All right, Bill," answered David handing him a dollar out of his well-worn pocketbook.

"Thanky, Marse David, thanky," and the old darky vanished to invest his wealth.

An hour later Mrs. Preston came up to tell her son of Richard's departure. David could not help a feeling of relief at the news, for he felt just a little unkindly toward this older brother, and was glad not to be thrown with him until he had overcome this attitude.

CHAPTER XXVII

GETTING ACQUAINTED

DAVID found his mother intensely interesting. Beyond a doubt she was still a handsome woman. Yet, though in the prime of life, she seemed the oldest woman he had ever known. Her hair was so very white and she took life so seriously, that he could not imagine her as a young girl. He had never caught the slightest twinkle in her eye, and she seemed entirely lacking the sense of humor, while about her there was an ever present feeling of self-repression. Taken all together, it was a novel sensation to be getting acquainted with one's own mother at twenty-five, to say nothing of walking from poverty into affluence, of being led through a severe spell of illness (after a twenty years' absence) back to one's own home and possessions.

During David's convalescence he took all this as it came, with quiet content, not troubling himself about responsibility, either new or old. But with returning health, various things began to weigh upon him. He had left home for a month's vacation. That time was now long past. He had intended during that vacation to seek his mother, and if possible to find work elsewhere and begin a new life away from Mona or anything that could remind him of her.

Now, he was evidently given new work by the hand of Providence, and it was the pleasant occupation of managing his own property, caring for his own mother and two afflicted brothers. He could readily give up all thoughts of the big lumber mill of which he had dreamed, and set himself to learn farming, in order to secure the best management of his own broad acres, because the latter was really more to his taste. Not for an instant had all these changes daunted him.

But he could not forget Mona. He could not sum up courage even to take a little picture of her from his watch. He wondered how he could have given up and come away as he had, without even a struggle to win her affections, when she had positively declared that she did not love Flint.

For days he debated as to whether he should write to her, to his former employer, and to Mrs.

Strong of his present surroundings, or leave himself shrouded in the mystery in which he was, to them, at present surrounded.

Finally he decided to write to Mrs. Strong of his present conditions, at the same time begging her not to mention him or his letters in writing back to Bess. Mona was probably married, while his employer had, no doubt, long since filled his place. There was no reason why they should all be disturbed with news of him.

After the letter to Mrs. Strong was written, he took out his watch and gazed long at Mona's face, after the manner of any young man engaged in forgetting the woman he loves.

As he sat thus, his mother entered the room unobserved and sat down beside him.

"Is that Mona McArthur's picture, David?" she inquired.

"Why, yes," he answered in embarrassed surprise. "How did you know of her?"

"You talked a great deal of her marriage and your own disappointment while you were so ill. You hadn't mentioned her since, so I supposed that to be a picture of her," was the calm response.

David sat silently gazing at the picture, and debating as to what reply he should make to this, when his mother inquired, "Is she married, David?"

"I suppose so, by this time," was the gloomy reply.

"You have no right to keep her picture in that way if she is another man's wife, my son," declared his mother in a tone of gentle reproof.

"If he has her, he ought not to begrudge me this little picture," was the moody response.

"No, but it does you harm," urged she with gentle persistence.

He set his lips firmly for a few minutes, then he answered gravely, "No, mother, I have loved her and planned for her ever since she was born, twenty years ago. I cannot forget her nor cease to love her at will. It is not my nature to love many people, nor to cease loving one after I begin. Burning this little picture would not help, for whenever I close my eyes, her face is before me. I cannot tell you all she is to me but I will try." Beginning as far back as he could remember, he told her of their lives together. When he was through he crossed his arms upon the table at his side and bowed his head upon them.

His mother stood over him for a moment, and laying her hand upon the bowed head, she said softly, "May the Lord help you, my son, I cannot." Then she passed quietly from the room and left him to himself.

CHAPTER XXVIII

A NEW FRIEND

WHEN Mr. McArthur became convinced that Mona's marriage to Mr. Flint would not take place, he was so incensed that his former manner toward her was affable compared to the present. He showed her by every frigidly polite means in his power that he was so displeased with her conduct that nothing would relieve him so much as to have her vanish forever from his presence. He could not send her away, for he knew she was perfectly aware that a part of the home and a modest income were hers. She was not the shrinking, timid creature her mother had been. She possessed some of her father's stubbornness, when opposed, though, unlike him, she would make any sacrifice for those who loved her.

While she held her ground in her own home, at times she found it very lonely. By and by she fell into the habit of running down to the little parsonage to spend an afternoon with Bess. These visits became more frequent as time passed. She had always looked upon the twins as too young for her companions, to Maud's great disgust. Now that Bess was married, however, she seemed more womanly, besides being nearer to David than any one else in reach.

The two soon became the best of friends. Mona frequently met the boyish young husband, in his own home, and grew to trust him. He was very kind to her, because Bess was so fond of her, his friend David loved her, and his own alert eyes saw her loneliness along with her ability to be so much more than she now was. He argued that if two such people as Bess and David loved her, she must be a lovable person. Because of his faith in his fellow beings, he was seldom disappointed in them, since it is human nature to try to be all that people think we are. Mona proved no exception to this rule. Gradually she began to attend church again, then Sabbath-school. Before a year had passed she had accepted Christ and become an earnest Christian worker, trying to take up the work that she felt in her heart she had caused David to leave; finally, however, doing a work of her own that he could never have done, had he remained, since he lacked both the time and the adaptability, which she possessed in abundance.

When Bess became a mother, Mona found a new interest in the chubby baby, for which she took many a dainty stitch. She never wearied of crooning over it and spending the great wealth of affection upon it, which for want of an object had heretofore gone to waste in her life.

Of course she was a great help to the happy young mother, with her ever ready sympathy and interest.

Late one gray November afternoon, she stopped at the parsonage door for a little visit. As she stood in the entry, preparatory to knocking, she heard Frank Trueheart call, "Bess, here is a marked copy of the Dallas paper, sent me to-day, containing a brief notice of David Strong's marriage. Could it be our David?" David's disappearance was still a mystery to them all.

The hand that Mona had raised to knock fell nerveless at her side, and she leaned heavily against the wall, as the reading fell upon her ear. When it was done she heard the rustle of skirts and knew that Bess had gone to read the news for herself. Presently Frank said, "It must be our David, but why he has acted as he has, I cannot understand."

"Oh, Frank, let's write to him," suggested Bess anxiously.

"No, dear, I don't believe it would be best. If he had wanted to hear from us, he would have written us long before this. I am sure there must be some good reason for his silence, because he is not a man to do things without a good and sufficient reason."

After this Mona slipped away, and they did not know the pain she had received upon their threshold.

"David married." It had never occurred to her that he could possibly marry any one but herself. Surely there must be some mistake. But the conversation at the parsonage went on. "Frank," said Bess, "I can't help believing that Mona had something to do with David's disappearance. She has been so changed since the night he went away."

"I shouldn't wonder if it was a lover's quarrel that sent him off; but it has evidently hurt her as much as it could possibly have hurt him," was the meditative answer.

That night, as she was finishing her supper, Mr. Flint called to see Mona. She entered the parlor under the ever watchful eye of her stepmother, who did not give expression to her hopes as to the effect of this visit added to the news in the morning's paper, which had not escaped her vigilant scrutiny.

After some conversation, in which Mr. Flint was very cheerful and Mona a trifle sad, he came bluntly to the object of his visit.

"Miss Mona, I am not a man to beat the devil about the bush, as the saying goes. I read to-day in the Dallas paper that David Strong was married."

"Is that so?" she inquired, but her evident lack of surprise convinced him that she had heard the news before.

"Yes," he continued, feeling through his pockets, "I thought I had the paper, but I guess I lost it. Anyway he is married. Now, Miss Mona, it was over him that we quarreled and broke our engagement. I came to-night to see if you would not make up. I am not happy and I don't believe you are."

Her eyes were on the floor, and she did not see the hungry look on the man's face. She thought a moment, then said, as kindly as she could, "No, Mr. Flint, I don't think I care to marry any one."

Looking at her pale downcast face, he felt that he had blundered, but he plunged on desperately, "Miss Mona, I have made my own way in the world from a boy. I think I have succeeded fairly well, considering my circumstances. I haven't set my heart on many things, but when I have, I haven't given up until I got them. I have wanted you a long time, and it's mighty hard for me to give up. I would do everything in my power to make you happy, if you would only risk me."

She hesitated only for an instant under his anxious gaze, then she answered:

"Honestly, Mr. Flint, I wish I could care for you in the way you want me to, but it is out of the question. When I promised to marry you before, I did not realize what it meant, but now it is utterly impossible, for I know I would wrong both you and myself to marry you."

"Won't you let me try to make you love me?" he begged.

"No, it would only make us both unhappy, and do no good," she replied.

He sighed and asked sadly, "Is there no hope of your ever changing your mind?"

She shook her head pityingly, but when he held out his hand, she took it and bade him a kind good-night. It seemed to her, just then, that so few people really loved her, she was loath to lose the love of this man, even though she could not love him.

On the following Sunday, Mona was a little surprised to find Mr. Flint sitting near her in church. She had never seen him there before. She wondered if he came because of her, then felt ashamed for having such a thought. After that he always occupied the same seat both at Sabbath-school and church. There were others, besides Mona, who could not help questioning his motives, but they soon forgot these questions because of his evident interest.

" He may have come at first to be near her," declared the pastor to his wife, " but it is evident he comes now because he enjoys it."

Bess felt, however, that they entirely misjudged him; that it was purely her husband's splendid sermons which had attracted him; and she consequently felt very kindly toward him.

CHAPTER XXIX

MONA'S NEW INTEREST

ONE bright spring day, Mona came briskly into the parsonage, stopped to shower a handful of orange-blossoms over the laughing, crowing baby, told Bess some recollection of the latter's babyhood, but presently sobered down and said, "I almost forgot my business, Bess, in playing with the baby. Oh, you darling!" as she caught up the baby and softly squeezed it. Mona was passionately fond of children. After placing it comfortably upon her knee, she went on, "Bess, I have been to see a poor woman this morning. She is the most pitiable object I ever saw. She is sick in bed, has nobody to wait on her, except her little twelve year old daughter, who would be pretty if she did not look so starved. They haven't a morsel to eat, nor a bed to sleep on, except a pile of straw. Ugh, it's perfectly awful! I never saw such abject poverty in all my life."

"Why, where in the world do they live?" demanded the sympathetic Bess.

"In that little old tumble-down house up the river by North mill."

"Oh!" gasped Bess, and her face hardened perceptibly; "Mona, you must not go there any more," she said with matronly dignity. "People talk about her. They say she is not the right kind of a woman."

"I don't suppose starving to death will make her any better," answered Mona dryly.

"Oh, no; we must help them; but people might make remarks if you went there, Mona," she protested.

"I have lived here all my life, Bess, and my reputation has been above question. If it won't stand my going to see a sick starving woman and giving her all the help I can, then it's a flimsy reputation, and not worth having."

"Yes, but a girl can lose a good name so easily," protested Bess, anxiously.

Mona hesitated, as if a little shy about speaking of such things, but finally said in a low tone, "When our Master was here he went to see anybody who needed him. It didn't make any difference how poor or how sinful he knew them to be; and Bess—it's enough for us to try to be like him, and I believe he can take care of my good name better than I can. I feel impressed that God is leading me to go to see those people and wants me to do all in my power for them. Don't try to persuade me to give them up."

Bess said no more, but slipping an arm about Mona's waist, she kissed her fondly. The caress meant more to the lonely girl than Bess could know, for she was an affectionate, tender-hearted creature, and often longed for just such tenderness. Her surroundings at home had become so icy that they fairly made her shiver.

"Frank," said Bess that night as she sat beside him, toasting the baby's toes, as they had their cozy bedtime conversation, "I almost wish Mona would marry Mr. Flint. If Davie is married, it won't help him for her to remain single. I believe she would be so much happier married. She is so domestic and loves children better than any girl I ever saw. She has been miserable ever since her stepmother took the housekeeping out of her hands. It's just a shame for such a good wife to be wasted."

The reverend Mr. Trueheart smiled at his wife's admiration of her own best qualities in another woman, as he answered, "I don't think it will be Flint's fault if she does not marry him."

"I mean to talk to her about it the very next time she comes," declared Bess stoutly.

"Better not, she might ask you to mind your own love affairs," he suggested, pinching her cheek. "If I remember rightly, there was a certain little woman who deeply resented her people's trying to persuade her to take pity on a poor parson."

"No, Mona won't; I know her better than that," she answered sagely, as she ignored his last remark, but smiled reminiscently at the fire and thought better of speaking to Mona on the subject of matrimony.

The next day Mona made her way, according to her promise, to the sick woman's house. She had sent provisions and a comfortable bed the day before. But she realized that the poor sufferer stood in need of friendship and sympathy as much as food.

The wan face lighted up with pleasure as she entered. The child ran to bring the one broken chair that the house contained for Mona to sit on.

She sat down by the bed and said kindly, "You received the things all right, I see."

"Oh, yes, they did help so much. I slept better last night than I have in a long, long time, and breakfast tasted real good this morning. I thought Estelle never would get enough to eat."

Mona smiled one of her most winning smiles, and inquired what she could do next. "I brought some clothes for your little girl, that a little friend of mine had outgrown, and here are two wrappers for yourself. It's a real kindness for you to take them so I can have an excuse to make some more. I have so much time. You see I put a wide ruffle at the bottom to make them long enough," and so she chatted on as she opened the bundle and laid out the things for them both to enjoy and Estelle to put away.

A look of mingled pain and gratitude came over the poor thin face. Tears slowly gathered in the dark sunken eyes, and coursed down the wasted cheeks.

"I do appreciate all your kindness, Miss McArthur, more than I can tell; but I didn't think I would ever come to this. There was a time when I had everything I wanted, with no thought of poverty," she said sorrowfully.

"I am so glad that I have something to divide, now that you haven't plenty. Perhaps some day you may be able to divide with me," added Mona cheerily as she handed the garments to the delighted Estelle.

When they were through with putting the

clothes away and had tidied up the room, Mona sent the child out to play in the sunshine, promising to stay with her mother until she returned.

When the woman was quite sure the little girl was out of hearing, she beckoned Mona to sit by the bed again, saying, "I am glad you could stay and send her away a little while, for I want to have a talk with you. I want to tell you about myself, then I shall ask a favor of you. My home was in Louisiana. My father owned a big plantation which he and my brother managed. My mother was dead, and I was necessarily a great deal alone. By and by there came bad crop years, until my father found it necessary to mortgage the plantation. After that we could never get out of debt.

"One stormy night a handsome young man stopped and asked to spend the night. Of course, he stayed, for no one was ever turned away. The next morning found him quite unwell. From that he lingered until he had been there over a month. He was very pleasant, we all liked him and were glad of his company on the lonely plantation. My father and brother were busy a great deal so I was left to entertain the good-looking stranger. I was young, foolish and by most people called pretty. We spent hours together. Sometimes we strolled about gathering wild flowers, sometimes he read to me while I sewed. Why my people did not realize that I was falling madly in love with him, I cannot tell. Finally he came one day and told me with a pale sad face that he must go away, but said he could not live without me, and I was easily persuaded to accompany him. We planned to go to the nearest town and be married. It was a long way to town, and before we were much more than half way, there came up a regular summer storm, and we were compelled to spend the night at a small house on the way. To keep from exciting suspicion, my lover persuaded me to say that I was his wife, urging that it would not be very false, as I was to take his name as soon as we reached town the next morning.

"When we awoke the next morning I overheard my father talking in a loud angry tone outside. Knowing his disposition I pleaded in terror with my lover to make his escape, knowing that if my father found him he would never rest until he had killed him. He bade me a tender farewell, and left me with the promise of meeting me, two days later, at a place we agreed upon, with a license and a minister. My father's anger, when he found me alone, may be imagined. He searched for my lover in vain, and finally carried me home. When I started to plead my cause, he sternly bade me be quiet, so there was nothing for me to do but wait until the time to meet my future husband. But the next morning my father informed me that I had a half-hour to prepare for a journey to a distant state, where I would in the future make my home with his sister. No amount of pleading could change him, so I sadly went on my journey.

"I found my aunt's home unpleasant from the first, and daily hoped my lover would learn my whereabouts by some means and come for me.

"Some time passed, then my aunt, finding what the near future held in store for me, turned me out of doors in bitter scorn.

"As best I could, I made my way back to my old home, only to find that my father and brother had moved away, that my former friends would not ever recognize me in my shame, and that the man I expected to marry had returned for me, but, being unable to learn my whereabouts, had gone, no one knew whither. I took his name, and from that day to this I have passed for, what I truly am at heart, a widow. Since that time I have drifted from place to place, making a living the best I could, until now I am past work. I have never told any one my story before, but somehow the awful shadow has followed me all my life, and I suppose must continue to follow my poor little girl. I know it must seem to you that I have acted very badly, and I know I did wrong, but please don't forget that I was very young, that I had no mother to advise me, and that I truly believed in the man who asked me to be his wife. I would never have told all this, but I know I am liable to pass away at any time, and I wanted you, who have been so kind, to know it, and then I want to ask you to get my little daughter a good home after I am gone. Here is her father's picture. If I could have lived, she should never have seen it or him, but I have to leave her to some one else to care for. When she is older, if you think best, you may give it to her, so that if she ever meets him, she can make herself known to him by it, and possibly he will take care of her. I have done the best I could."

She slipped a little locket from a chain about her neck, handed it to Mona, then wearily closed her eyes.

She did not see the latter turn pale, as her gaze fell upon a picture wonderfully resembling David Strong. There were the same dark hair and clear eyes looking out at her. She caught her breath and glanced away, but in a moment her eyes were fixed upon the picture again. She knew that David could not have been in Louisiana since he was a little child. On second scrutiny, she found that the chin did not have that square, firmly-set look that David's had, the mouth and nose were perhaps more delicate, but all bore a look of weakness that David had never had, though at first glance the picture bore a striking resemblance to him. Again the picture was that of a man, evidently about David's present age, although it must have been taken some twelve or fifteen years ago. With a long drawn sigh of relief she turned the locket over and curiously read the initials upon the back, R. P., until she was sure they with the face, were indelibly fixed in her memory. When she glanced back at the woman she found her gazing steadily at her.

"Do you know him?" she questioned hesitatingly.

"No," was Mona's cheerful answer as she handed back the locket, adding, "You keep it as long as you live. If you should be taken away, I will keep it for your little girl and in every possible way do the best I can for her."

Presently Estelle came in, and Mona took her departure. She went every day to see the invalid, and became very much attached to the little girl. Some weeks later the woman died. After the burial Mona put the locket away in her pocket and carried Estelle home with her to spend the night, intending to begin a search for a suitable home on the following day. But the next morning Mona was ill, and remained so for many days. While it was not a serious illness, it confined her to her room for some time. Mrs. McArthur, who would otherwise have objected to the child's presence, was evidently glad to have her to wait on Mona and so relieve herself of that care.

Estelle was a bright, docile little creature, and had grown to love Mona devotedly. She would sit silently on a little stool by Mona's side for hours, watching her face as if to divine her slightest wish. At times her devotion became almost pitiful. For Mona to make a request of her always brought a smile of delight to the eager face. She was so thin, so quick in her movements, her eyes were so bright and restless, that she reminded Mona of a poor little half-starved bird hopping about the hand that had fed and caressed it. At times she would be overcome with grief for her mother, though she never mentioned the beloved name. At such times she would throw herself sobbing at Mona's feet, and twining her arms about her benefactor's knees, she would always cry, "Oh, Miss Mona, what would I do without you?" One afternoon, as Mona improved, she sat reading "Bleak House," which she found very entertaining.

By and by she looked up to find the child gazing longingly at her. "Well, what is it, Estelle?" she inquired, smiling as she laid aside her book.

"I was just watching you read. It seemed to be lots of fun. You smile sometimes, then sometimes you wipe your eyes, and all the time you don't look like you remember anything else but what you read."

"Yes, it is a great pleasure. Don't you like to read?" asked Mona.

"I think I would," answered Estelle, after a moment's embarrassed hesitation.

"Oh, I see. You haven't learned yet. I never thought of that. You use very good language, and it never occurred to me that you did not read. I was very thoughtless not to notice it, but never mind, now while I have so little to do I am going to teach you. That will entertain us both," she declared enthusiastically.

"Oh, will you?" cried the little girl, springing to her feet in her excitement.

"Why, of course," was the reply. Going to her closet Mona presently brought out a book, and they had a lesson without delay. Once started Mona found she could hardly stop the child. The poor little mind seemed even more starved than the body had been. Every day Estelle begged so hard for just one more lesson that Mona found it almost impossible to stop her. She effected a compromise by reading stories to her charge. After her own supply of story-books was exhausted, she procured more from various friends for her rapt listener. To this bright uneducated mind, these days were a continual dream of delight. A new world had opened before her, in which she reveled as one in a delightful dream. But she did not cease to be a faithful nurse. Her experience in caring for her mother now stood her in good stead. Her love for Mona made her a willing slave. Her ready feet ran numerous errands for her benefactor, and she little dreamed that she was often sent out purely to get the sunshine and outdoor exercise, which she so much needed.

In a short while Mona thought best to add some simple lessons in arithmetic, then other studies, until her pupil was making rapid progress in regular school work. Her mind and body were both progressing rapidly under Mona's teaching, nor was her spiritual welfare neglected. Mona began by telling her Bible stories, but soon gave up and read them to her from the book.

This pleasant work had gone on for some weeks, and Mona was seriously considering the adoption of her little companion, when Mr. McArthur, at the instigation of his wife, objected to the child's presence. On seeing Mona quite well again, the mistress of the house had become alarmed at the attachment between them, and wished it discontinued.

The companionship of the child had grown very sweet to Mona in the loneliness of the past weeks, and she was loath to give Estelle up. She even contemplated adopting her in spite of her father's wishes, but she decided it would not be best to oppose him unnecessarily, so she sought with a heavy heart for a new home in which she might place the child. She was not at all successful in this undertaking. Homes she could find, but where the child would become a servant and have no opportunities for an education. These she could not make up her mind even to consider. While her own income was sufficient for her and Estelle's present needs, if she might keep the latter with her, yet she knew it was impossible for her to send her charge away to school. At last in her great discouragement, she brought her troubles to her Heavenly Father, whereupon there came to her, as by inspiration, a thought which she put into prompt execution.

A few days later, she received a letter over which she smiled happily. When Estelle was at leisure, she called her to sit down upon her little stool for an important talk.

The little girl's face became very sad when Mona said, " Now, dear, I cannot keep you with me much longer, but where I went to college, the president's wife is the kind good woman I have told you so much about. She has been such a dear friend to me, and so I wrote to her the other day about you. In that school they take a number of girls every year and let them pay their expenses by washing dishes. I can buy your books and clothing, making the latter myself. She says she has a vacancy, and can take you in that way if you wish to come. She will keep you there until you have finished your education, and then if I still cannot have you with me, they will probably give you some position in the school. You can begin with them now, as they have a preparatory department as well as the regular college course. Would you like to go?"

"Oh, Miss Mona, there is nothing I would like better if I didn't have to leave you!" she cried, bursting into sobs.

"Well, dear, you will do a great deal better there than I could possibly do for you if you stayed with me. I will write to you every week, and send you everything you need. I am sure it is the finest opportunity for you that I could possibly find."

"I shall be glad to have the chance, but it seems hard to leave any one I love so much, especially as you are the only friend I have in the world," she answered, striving vainly to check her sobs.

"Oh, yes, but you will have me just the same, and make lots of new friends there besides," declared Mona with ready sympathy.

Presently the little girl was comforted, and together they planned for the going away.

Mona accompanied her, quite willing to visit the school. She was received with such a warm welcome as to make little Estelle's heart swell with pride in her benefactor.

After a few days' visit, Mona left her charge well satisfied and came back to her lonely life at home. She found wholesome employment in making the sum heretofore used for her own clothing suffice for both, doing all of her sewing now, in order to invest her money in good material. To her surprise she was less lonely than before she took the child into her life. Now she had so much more to keep her busy and employ her thoughts. This was good for her, as she had no intimate friends left now but busy Bess, her other old friends having married, moved away, or grown away from her since she had left her old butterfly life for serious work.

Even mammy had drifted back to her old home, and now lived with her son Jeff, of whom she was quite as fond as she was of Mona.

No doubt she would have felt as lonely, at this time, as if she had not a relative in the world, but for the child that had been placed in her care. No one knew what pleasure she found in reading the cramped little letters that came each week freighted with care, painstaking and love for her. Of course, they were promptly answered. These regular letters each week also bound her all the more closely to her college. Dear old school, where so many girls had been given the opportunity to gain an education by the toil of their own hands! Many are the women who will rise up to call thee blessed!

As to Estelle's history, Mona had decided, after due deliberation, to tell no one the story the dying mother had told her. She could at least start her charge out unhampered by such a shadow. No one except herself, not even the child, knew the story. Why hang it as a millstone about her neck?

She soon found that she still had time to spare, but as she became more interested in church work, she learned there was plenty to do there. Under Frank Trueheart's direction, she hunted up poor little unkempt waifs, and, after getting them something to wear, started them in the Sabbath-school. At the suggestion of Bess, she established a large box in one of the parsonage closets, where their children's outgrown clothing was deposited by friends, to be dealt out to those who could not go to Sabbath-school or church for want of something to wear. This enterprise well started, she became the secretary and treasurer of the Sabbath-school, starting a Sabbath-school library, which was received with delight by the children.

Next she organized the young people into a missionary and library society. Before she realized it, she was one of the busiest women in town, and with her work came new friends and happiness.

CHAPTER XXX

A NEW OCCUPATION

WHEN health came back, David set himself just as diligently to study farming and the wise management of his property, as he had studied his lessons at Mrs. Strong's knee in boyhood days, or later the work of his employer, when he had planned to be a lumberman. He studied his work, his renters, his hands and his servants, for their needs as well as his own.

He conscientiously strove to do his duty by all who came under his directions, to be a faithful steward of what his Lord had put in his keeping.

In his watch remained the picture of the merry, bright-eyed girl, who had grown to be a part of his very life.

His mother made rather unskilful efforts to throw him with other girls, hoping he might find one who could make him forget Mona McArthur. Sometimes her efforts made him smile, but he never reproached her, feeling that in time she would give it up. Any change was hard for him to make, especially one that had entered into his very life.

At last his mother one day asked, " David, don't you think you ought to hunt a wife and settle down?"

"I am settled, mother," he answered quietly.

"Yes, but I would be glad to see you happy with a wife. I know you must get lonely at times," she persisted.

"Well, I have you and Hugh," he answered, laying an affectionate hand upon his younger brother's shoulder, that instantly brought a happy smile to the patient face.

"But we do not take the place of a wife. We have our own places to fill."

"There never was but one woman for me, mother. Marriage to another would be a mockery. It may be wrong, but if I knew she needed me or that I could help her, I would go to her in spite of every other woman in the world. It would not be right for me to marry some one else, feeling that way, would it?" he asked looking into her eyes with a longing that hurt her.

"I wish you could overcome that," she answered sadly.

"Well, if I ever find one that I can care for, I will try to win her, but as long as Mona is first, I won't offer another woman what I don't possess. Will that do?"

"I suppose it must," she replied, and ceased her efforts to arouse his interest in any one else.

But David was not unhappy. Between his work, the church, in which he had quickly taken an interest, and the making of his mother, Hugh and even poor Giddings happy by his kind consideration, he managed to find ample employment.

Five years glided by in this quiet busy life. There was little change in David except that he grew broader, acquired the ease that the society of cultured people gives and, in fact, developed into the strong well-rounded character he had long given promise of becoming.

One December morning his mother received and handed him a telegram from Richard, saying that he would be home in a day or two.

"Why, it's from B——. I did not know he was there!" exclaimed David, at once becoming interested. "I have wondered if he were never coming home again," he continued, still curiously inspecting the telegram, as he talked.

"Oh, I have long ceased to worry over Richard," answered his mother. "Ever since the war, he has been this way. I have thought perhaps it was because of John's death, but he never remains at home many months at a time.

This, however, had been the longest absence he has ever made."

"Well, I am glad he is coming from B——, mother. You don't know how hard I have tried to put that old life out of my mind, but I do long for news of my old home," said David, expecting a mild reproof in reply.

"If I were you, I would go back and make a visit. It would do you good," suggested his mother, hoping that this might cure his longing for Mona more quickly than anything else.

"Perhaps I will," he answered more eagerly than she had ever heard him speak before. "I have long wanted to go, but thought maybe I ought not. I don't think I could bear to see her unhappy."

"Perhaps she is happy. Doubtless she is greatly changed. It might be the best thing for you," was the hopeful response. He smiled at the suggestion underneath her words, but brightened up at the thought of the coming visit.

She wondered, as she noticed the change in his face, why she hadn't thought of this suggestion before.

A few mornings later, Richard, who had arrived the previous night, was telling of his travels, when David came out of a brown study to inquire, "Your telegram was from B——. Did you meet many people there?"

"Yes, I spent two or three weeks there. I liked it pretty well; met quite a number of nice folks."

"Did you meet a Mr. McArthur?" was David's next query.

"No, I heard of him, but I took more interest in his pretty daughter, whom I saw soon after I got there. I wanted to meet her, but a fellow by the name of Saunders, Harry, I think, said it was no use, that she hadn't hardly looked at a man for years. It seems, from all I could learn, that she had been in love with a fellow. He had suddenly gone away and she took it pretty hard, gave up society and took to religion and all that sort of thing," continued the voluble Richard, who though nearing forty was still a gay bachelor quite susceptible to feminine charms.

Martha Preston glanced quickly at David's face. The expression thereon made her drop her eyes as quickly to her plate. For a moment his poor starved heart was in his eyes, the next he was quite himself. Presently Richard inquired, "Were you ever in B——?"

"Oh, yes, I was reared there."

" Probably you know Saunders ? "

" Yes, quite well," was the answer.

" Did you know Miss McArthur ? "

" We were neighbors," David replied.

" Humph, and you asked about her father and didn't say a word about a girl like that. You are woman proof," declared Richard gaily.

" Yes," assented David smiling, then rising from the table, he said, " Mother, will you pack my clothes ? I want to take a little trip and will be very busy this morning. I want to leave on the noon train."

" Certainly," she answered, but her heart sank a little, for she could but dread the result of this trip, whichever way it terminated. Should David's suit be successful, she did not know what kind of a daughter he might bring her; if he failed, then he must fight his long battle over again. But she trusted in God. While she packed his clothes, she prayed for the wearer and her own heart was comforted.

When he returned it was for his dinner, his valise and a hasty farewell.

" If I can, I shall bring her back with me. I can't be back to spend Christmas, but I hope to be here by the New Year."

“ God bless you ! ” was her answer, as she kissed him good-bye. He went away with an eager alertness she had never seen in him before.

“ Dear boy,” she said to herself, as she watched him vanish down the street. “ I didn’t know hope would change him so much.”

CHAPTER XXXI

DAVID AND MONA

TO David, his journey seemed interminable. At last, on Christmas eve, in the gathering dusk, he left the train, and walked briskly down the streets of B——. He did not have time to note the changes in the old town. He could do that later. His sole thought was to see Mona McArthur, and as soon as possible make her his wife. When he finally reached her home, rang the bell and waited, it seemed to him hours, for the door to open, it was at last to be met by disappointment. A sleepy-eyed negro woman opened the door and informed him that "Miss Mona done gone ter help fix up a Christmas tree."

"Which one, whereabouts?" demanded David impatiently.

"Dunno, sir," was the answer.

"When will she be back?" he inquired helplessly.

"I 'speck she'll be back diraictly. If you lacks you kin jes' step inter ther parlor and wait fer her."

David decided this was the best thing he could do. There was a big fire burning in the open fireplace, which gave the whole room a bright cheerful glow. Upon one side of the fire was a large armchair, while upon the other a low couch invited the tired traveler to repose. He did not think of the possible consequences, should Mr. McArthur come in and find him there; in fact, he did not think of Mr. McArthur at all. He settled himself to wait for Mona. He was quite tired, the warm room made him drowsy after his brisk walk in the open air, and the couch was very comfortable. Before he knew it he was half asleep, and remained so for some minutes, then a quick step in the hall, a rustle of skirts and a gentle closing of the parlor door aroused him to a wide-awake eagerness, but he resolutely kept his eyes closed and lay quite still waiting for her to recognize him. He longed to look at her but stubbornly waited. She did not see him until she reached the middle of the floor. Then with a quick little cry she stood beside him. "Davie, my dear old Davie!" she joyously murmured, then kneeling beside him she looked longingly into his face.

When he could bear it no longer, the great gray eyes opened and a wonderfully tender smile lit up the strong handsome face.

"My own little girl!" he said taking her face between his hands and looking so lovingly into her eyes that it made her face rosy.

"I learned three days ago that you were not married, and I came straight here to ask you to marry me, now, to-night! Will you?" he begged, his voice quivering with eagerness.

She could bear no more, and in another instant her face was on the broad shoulder near her, while she sobbed as if her heart would break.

"There, there, little girl," said David gravely as he patted the much loved head in troubled perplexity. "If you can't care for me as I wish, it is all right. I'll go away and bear it the best I can and never trouble you again."

"Oh, Davie!" she gasped, "it's not that, I do care more than I can tell. But I was so lonely, and sad and tired. I felt like nobody wanted me or cared for me. Everybody had Christmas cheer and I was shut out. Oh, you don't know how hard I prayed, coming home to-night, not to feel wicked. I have worked so hard all day trying to make somebody else happy and forget about myself, but

"MY OWN LITTLE GIRL"

when I came home and the house looked so lonely, I felt like I could not bear it another minute. Then I came in and found ——"

"Found somebody who has wanted you all your life more than anything else in the world," finished David, elated to find himself such a success at comforting her.

Presently there was a sound of shuffling feet coming up the hall, then a voice in the doorway said, "Miss Mona, supper done been ready a long time."

"All right, Jane," was the happy answer, then looking at the clock on the mantel she gave a little scream of dismay saying, "Oh, Davie, I've promised the children to get back to the Christmas tree in one hour. Half the time is gone already and I haven't eaten supper or dressed." She glanced down at the rents in her dress, which she had forgotten until now, made while working on the Christmas tree that afternoon.

"Tomboy," said David, pinching her cheek as his eyes followed her glance.

"Now, Davie," she said leading the way to the dining-room, "you eat your supper while I go and make myself presentable."

"No, I am not going to eat without you any more. You are tired and must not go without your supper," he answered positively.

She sat down very demurely, and ate without more ado.

"Where is your father?" David suddenly thought to ask.

"Oh, they went to Alabama to spend Christmas. I don't know what possessed papa. I never knew him to take a vacation before."

"Are you here all alone?" demanded David savagely.

"Yes, I did not care to accompany them and they did not care to have me," she answered with cheerful frankness, for now that David had come, she felt that nothing else mattered.

"Now, Davie, I simply must dress."

He laid a detaining hand upon her arm as she started to pass him. "Put on your prettiest dress, for this is your wedding night," he said.

"Davie," she laughed, "you surely don't expect me to marry on such short engagement as this; in fact, I don't believe we are even engaged."

"Never mind that, we are going to marry to-night anyway," he answered coolly.

"Where?" she demanded, saucily.

"Anywhere you like," was his serene reply.

"Don't you think you are a trifle dictatorial?" she questioned as she dodged past him and made her way up to her room.

She was back again in a few minutes looking, to David's eyes, lovelier than he had ever seen her.

"Where are we going to be married?" he questioned as they went out into the starlight.

"I think Santa Claus will marry us at the Christmas tree," she answered softly.

"I guess we had better stop and get our license on the way," said David in a tone that indicated quiet satisfaction.

This off his mind, he spent the remainder of the walk in a brief account of his movements from the last time he was with her until the present. Then he listened to her ups and downs, what a lonely life she had led, how she thought David was married until a few weeks ago, when Mr. Flint had confessed to having put a notice of David Strong's marriage in the paper, hoping that she would then marry him. But sweetest of all to David's ears was how she had missed and longed for him ever since he had gone away. They reached the church before they realized it.

After the Christmas tree was cleared of its splendid fruit, the audience was astonished and delighted, when their pastor announced that Santa Claus had added a special feature to their program; and presently David and Mona stood beneath its boughs and had a simple wedding. Afterward they had to go home with Frank and Bess for a little visit, so quite two hours had passed before they reached their own door again.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE NEW HOME

"WELL, we promised Bess last night that we would eat Christmas dinner with her to-day, so I guess we had better spend the time, until we go down there, packing up my things, had we not?" questioned Mona, stopping from her dusting to perch on the arm of David's chair before the parlor fire on Christmas morning.

"There is no great hurry about the packing. I should not mind spending three or four days here looking up old friends. That will give you time to tell everybody good-bye and put everything in order," answered David who felt loath to think of making any change in his easy surroundings, which he greatly enjoyed, especially with Mona always in reach.

"Why, what in the world were you in such a mortal hurry about marrying last night for, if you did not have to go right back?" demanded the saucy bride, admiring the strong healthy face before her more than she would have admitted, even to him. Evidently his past five years had not been wasted, for he had acquired ease, a certain polish, and a settled manliness that he had not possessed before he went away.

An amused twinkle came into his eyes at her question, but he took her hands into his own, pretending to inspect them very gravely, turning them over but holding them close all the time. Finally he looked up to see if she were getting impatient, but finding that she was not he answered: "Well, in the first place, I had taken a few days off from my work and I wanted my honeymoon to begin while I had time to enjoy it, not just as I was ready to go back to my work. For you must know, Mrs. Preston, that your husband is a very busy man. Again, I knew if I let you wait until the last minute, you would insist upon a wedding dress, which was entirely unnecessary as you always have plenty of clothes. I wanted you, not the wedding dress. After a man has waited twenty-five years for a woman to grow up, and his opportunity comes, he ought not to be accused of haste, even if he is not willing to wait twenty-five minutes longer."

"I suppose not," answered Mona in a meek tone that her expression wholly contradicted. She enjoyed this masterful lover, and secretly wondered whether his five years' experience away from her had wrought the change in him, or if it had come suddenly with his success in wooing her. She decided it must be both.

"The only thing I don't like about all this is staying here at your father's house without his knowledge, especially as I fear I might not be welcome if he knew it," went on David more soberly.

Mona sat up very straight, saying in her most dignified tone, "This is my house, as well as papa's. My husband has as much right here as his wife. Of course, it wouldn't be pleasant if they were here, but that would be because of my preferring you to Mr. Flint. Now that doesn't sound very homelike, I'll admit, but we can be cozy here with nobody to interfere."

"Never mind, we are going to a home that we can make what we like. Mother and my brothers will love you. We will be as happy as it is possible for anybody to be," declared David, to comfort her, for he read the longing for love and tenderness in that proud heart better than she realized.

They had a delightful day with Frank and Bess. Both of them rejoiced in the new happiness of these dear friends, though dreading inexpressibly to give them up.

After the dinner was over, Frank had to take David for a short stroll just to tell him what a fine Christian Mona had become. Nothing could have added to David's happiness more than this, for who of us do not rejoice when our prayers for our best beloved are answered?

After their walk, the two men came back to a wonderfully pretty picture. Bess with her baby in her arms sat before the fire smiling at Mona and David's namesake having a jolly romp about the room.

When the day was past Mona and David came back to their own fireside.

"This has been the happiest day in my whole life," declared Mona, nestling down upon the sofa beside her husband. It was a little early to light the lamp, so they sat in the glow of the firelight brimful of Christmas good will.

"I don't think I need even tell you that I am happy," he replied, drawing her close to him.

"Yes, I want you to tell me when you are happy. I don't care if it's every day of your life. I don't want us to take things for granted. I am tired of seeing people do that. It isn't hard to show our love and happiness while showing them adds to the happiness of others."

"All right, I am the very happiest man alive and expect to continue so as long as I live," he gaily responded to her mood.

"That's better," she said, leaning her head against his shoulder, and smiling into the fire.

"When you spoke just now, I was thinking of the five years of happiness we have lost through my own rash folly," said David, thoughtfully.

"Is it lost?" she asked.

"Perhaps not," he answered, then waited for her to continue. She was silent a moment, then went on, "No, dear, I am sure it is not lost, though I don't think I could have said so if you hadn't come back to me. As it is, I believe it's the best. If we had not misunderstood each other, you probably would never have found your people and your inheritance that your mother had managed for you so long. God had that work for you to do and I believe he brought you here, gave you the training of poverty with plenty of hard work, so that you might be able to use more wisely what your grandfather left you.

"If I had continued to have you to depend on, I should never have learned to depend upon God. He had to take away my best friend, leaving me lonely and sad, for me to find out what a faithful friend he could be. Oh, Davie, you don't know how hard it was to find out how we loved each other, only to have you suddenly disappear! Life seemed so hard and bitter that had I not been afraid of death, I should have prayed to die. But God gave me Bess and Frank to help me, and in my great need they showed me my best Friend. After that I felt that I had driven you away and must try, the best I could, to take your work."

After this he told her of his prayers that she might become a child of God and that he might find his mother.

"Why, Davie, you prayed like that and then are worrying because God answered your prayers!" she exclaimed.

"I'm afraid that is just what I was doing," he admitted.

"Never mind, dear, we have God and each other. What more can we ask for the future?" she cried joyously.

For answer he swept her into a close embrace and pressed a lingering kiss upon her lips. After this, they sat in the flickering firelight, each knowing the other's heart and finding no words to express their mutual content.

The next morning David had a long talk with his old employer, who was highly gratified at the young man's good fortune.

In the afternoon Mona said, "Davie, there is an old woman here in town that I want you to visit with me. I think you have seen her before, but I am not certain."

David readily agreed, asking no questions, for it was evident that Mona wanted to give him some kind of a surprise.

She took him to a little old tumbled-down house on a back street. An old woman with yellowish gray hair, a faded dress and a wrinkled leathery face, sat in an old broken rocking-chair by the window. Her face lit up with pleasure at sight of Mona, then changed to a look of perplexity as she caught sight of the stranger with her.

"Granny," said Mona, after introducing "Mr. Preston," seating him in the only other chair the room contained, then drawing a little box up close to the old woman's chair for herself, "I want you to tell this gentleman about that little boy you carried around in the wagon so long ago. I think perhaps he knows something about the boy."

The woman looked eagerly at him out of her dim old eyes, then told her story in a quavering voice.

When she had finished, Davie came and stooped over her saying, "Mammy, don't you know me? I am your little boy."

"Hit shorely air not leetle David!" she quavered, ending with a little inarticulate cry of delight.

"Yes, mammy, I came back here two nights ago to marry this little girl, and take her home with me. Five years ago I found my mother and my old home, and everything is well with me."

"Thank the good Lord fer that!" she ejaculated. "But Davie, what did you do before you went back to your home?" she questioned. "I hev been a werryin' about you a long time."

"Why, the dear woman on whose steps you left me was all a mother could be to any man. So you see God gave me three mothers where he gives most men only one. But mammy, I have to go home in a few days. My own mother is anxious to get acquainted with my wife, but before I go I want to make you comfortable for the rest of your life."

She thanked him so gratefully that it brought tears to Mona's eyes.

The two asked each other many questions, the old woman rejoicing in one breath over his prosperity, the next lamenting that Mona was going away.

"She's been mighty good to me, Davie, an' you must take good keer of her," she cautioned.

"Why, granny, he has been taking care of me all my life, until five years ago when he became disgusted and went away. Not long ago he decided he could not trust me to myself, so he came back and married me so he could make me mind. You should just hear him now. I tell you he speaks as one having authority," declared Mona, mischievously.

The old soul smiled a troubled smile and said as she patted Mona's hand, "It look like all sunshine now, chile, but merried women don't generally always have a good time." Then turning back to the husband she asked, "Promise me, Davie, ye'll be good to her. I want she should be happier then I hev been."

"Yes, mammy, I'll promise. I couldn't help it. I have loved her so long."

After his promise she watched them go away together satisfied.

Before he and Mona went home they made every arrangement for the old woman's comfort that they could think of, and left her happy in the promise not to forget her.

The last morning before their departure a telegram came in answer to one sent by Mona to her father, on the day after their marriage. It said, "You have made your choice. You must abide by it." She struggled bravely to show no sign of the hurt it gave her, but her chin would quiver, while she had to set her lips together very hard indeed.

David, quick to read every expression of her face, saw her pain. Rejoicing that he at last had the right, he drew her into his sheltering arms and whispered, as she buried her face on his shoulder, "Don't worry about it; that's just his way, dearie. He doesn't mean any harm by it."

"Oh, but I hate such a way! I have borne with it all my life, and I am sick of it," she flashed hotly.

"You don't have to bear it any longer," he declared confidently. "We will leave that all behind and begin our new life in earnest to-day."

Presently he succeeded in comforting her, for really she could have expected little else from her father, though she had hoped for something better.

That evening they began their homeward journey. Mona rather dreaded meeting David's mother, though she would not grieve him by telling him so. When she did meet her, she was quite filled with awe at the stately white-haired lady, until the latter embraced her son's wife saying very kindly, "I have lived so long with a family of boys, and you can't know how I have wished for a daughter in this big lonely house."

"You can't guess how I miss having a mother," responded the warm-hearted girl impulsively.

With this they became devoted companions. The innocent fun of the younger contrasted so agreeably with the sober self-repression of the older woman. Even David often wondered at their harmony, because of the great difference in their characters, not realizing that this very difference made each the complement of the other.

In due time Mona became a blessing to them all, for she lighted up the old house like a burst of sunshine. David became doubly proud of her, since she had won all his family to love her. His mother hardly wanted the girl out of her sight. Poor blind Hugh listened eagerly for her footsteps, enjoyed her jokes and coaxed her to read to him by the hour. Giddings wanted to follow her about like a faithful dog, for she always had a gentle word for the simple-minded fellow.

Mona was at her best now. Nothing brought out her best qualities like being loved. She had never had so much love before, and finding the vague longings of her life satisfied, she could not do enough for their happiness. She became especially fond of Hugh, and even thought a greal deal of Giddings, but she did not fancy Richard, although she managed to conceal this feeling quite cleverly. How could she be fond of him, knowing as she did, from the poor old woman, of his treatment of David, and of the misery and distress he had brought upon that other confiding creature? For Mona had known, after her first glance in Richard's face, that he was the father of her little protegée off at school.

He did not suspect for an instant, that all this knowledge was shut up in her busy brain, as she flitted about making them all gay and happy, with her inexhaustible fun and kindness. He loved to see her about, always offered her his assistance if he imagined that she needed it, or brought his paper and sat wherever she sat at her sewing, embroidery or music, for he, like the rest, loved to linger near her.

CHAPTER XXXIII

A LONG TALK

IT was a pleasant day in the late spring. Mona was busy sewing on a dainty white dress to send to Estelle for commencement. She did this regularly every year, for she remembered quite well how important the white commencement dress was to a school-girl at the close of the session.

She was determined that this poor child, who had such a hard battle to fight, should have this one taste of luxury.

Mona still made her clothes and wrote to her regularly every week, while the girl adored her benefactor as much as ever. She tried to dress Estelle sensibly, but the commencement dress was always a little finer than the rest, for it was the main gift of the year, outside of the Christmas box, generously packed and regularly sent some days before that best loved holiday.

But this commencement dress was to surpass the rest, for Estelle was getting into her teens. So Mona spent days in making it, reveling in the dainty muslin ruffles, the girlish bit of lace, but most of all in the thought of how the dark-eyed little maid would shed tears of ecstasy over "the beautiful gift of dear Miss Mona."

Sometimes as Mona sat before the window and sewed, her mind wandered away to dreams of her own, which none but her David shared, for these two made great plans as they went about together, trying always to remember their own struggles, so as to carry sunshine and help wherever they went.

So busy was she with her dreams one afternoon, that at times she dropped her sewing in her lap and looked away across the mighty river. Richard, the only other occupant of the room, laid aside his paper and leaning back in his chair thought with a sigh of satisfaction that this pretty sister, with her flushed cheeks and shining eyes, was a comfortable addition to the household. Presently it occurred to him to inquire whose dress she was making, since it was much too small for herself. She promptly took this opportunity to tell him of the orphan child, and succeeded in getting him quite interested. Presently she said, "Wait, I will show you her picture." She ran lightly up to her room and presently returned with the picture in one hand, and the little old locket concealed in the other.

She watched him keenly when she gave him the picture, for she fancied that the child closely resembled her mother, in the latter's happy young days, before she knew poverty and degradation.

He looked at the picture, uttered a sudden exclamation, and after gazing at it a long time he handed it back with a sigh, then asked, "Did you say her name is Estelle?"

"Yes, I think it was her mother's name. I also judge she must be very much like her mother was before she had trouble," answered Mona.

He gave her a curious look, but said nothing.

"This," Mona presently continued, holding out the locket, "her mother gave me to keep for the child until she is grown. It is her father's picture."

He stared down at his own face, as the locket lay in his hand, turned it over and read his own initials upon the back. It was a trinket he had given her in the brief, happy days of their courtship.

Presently it slipped from his grasp, and bowing his head in his hands, he gave vent to long, shuddering sobs that made Mona's heart ache with pity for the suffering man.

After a time he raised his head and said, chokingly, "Mona, I know you despise me, but, oh, you don't know anything about the punishment that weakness and self-indulgence bring."

"No, brother Richard, I don't understand it," she answered in a kind, sympathetic tone.

He was quick to recognize from the change in her tone that she now saw his side as well as that of the other sufferer, and longed with all of her sisterly heart to help him. Instantly he took courage and poured the story of his heartache and misery into her ears. After he had finished he added sadly, "Mona, I could never understand why people have so much sympathy and patience with the physically and mentally afflicted like Hugh and Giddings, and yet have nothing but contempt for a poor weak devil like myself. Mine is an affliction as well as theirs. Some ancestor is responsible for it, and why should I struggle, go down and spoil the life of a fair young creature like that? I'd a thousand times rather have their affliction than mine," and he buried his face in his hands again.

"Shall I tell you why, brother Richard?" she asked quietly. He nodded and she said: "The fact that you can struggle against your affliction, shows that it is possible for you to overcome it, while for them there is nothing but patient endurance. If the world has no sympathy for you, it is because you have yielded when you might have had the victory."

At this he dismally shook his head, but she continued,

"If you can't do it alone, there is One standing always ready and anxious to help you. I know what I am talking about. I am hot-headed and impulsive, but he has helped me over and over again. He said himself that he came not to bring the righteous, but sinners to repentance. While he was here on earth he forgave the very vilest people who came to him. All that was necessary was to seek forgiveness. Oh, if you only knew what a comfort it is to have his help, and how willing he is to give it!"

"Pray for me, Mona, for I do need help," groaned the poor man.

"I will be glad to do so, and, brother Richard, won't you read this?" she begged, handing him a little Testament, which she kept in her sewing-machine drawer.

It touched him and he promised.

She stooped and picked up the locket. Seeing her movement, he begged piteously, "Mona, don't ever show that thing to the poor child. Don't tell her the shadow that hangs over her. I will do everything in my power to make amends to her for the past."

"Very well," promised Mona, feeling that this was a start in the right direction.

A few days later they completed a great plan. With the pretty new dress, which Mona sent to Estelle, went a long letter inviting the young girl to spend her vacation in the beautiful home which Mona had so often described. In the letter was a check, supposedly from Mona, sufficient to defray all expenses. Of course Mrs. Preston had been told of Mona's young friend long before this, and, finding that Mona wished to invite her there, she gladly added her invitation to the rest. But of Richard's interest in her, not even David yet knew.

In three weeks Estelle came. In spite of her regular correspondence with her, Mona was surprised at the rapid improvement the girl had made. It was with not a little pride that she made her protegée acquainted with the family.

Before the summer was over, Richard had adopted the charming girl. He was truly a new man now, for he had become a follower of Christ. The responsibility of raising his daughter sobered him even more. On the day that he adopted Estelle, Mona privately gave him the old locket to dispose of as he thought best, its mission, as far as she was concerned, having been fulfilled. He rode away to town, and returning an hour later he dropped the trinket, attached to a pretty new gold chain, into Estelle's hand saying, "Estelle, here is a picture of me in my young days. You may have it if you care to wear it." She thanked him, and clasping the chain about her neck ran to show it to Mona. The latter smiled through her tears, as she kissed the girl, saying, "You must be a faithful daughter to him, Estelle, for he evidently loves you very much."

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE CONCLUSION

ONE day during the following winter there came a letter from Mrs. Strong urging them to make her a visit. She longed to see her boy and Mona again, as well as to get acquainted with his mother and rejoice with her over the kind Providence that had returned her son to her.

The entire family was invited, but Richard, not deeming it wise to withdraw Estelle from school to take a trip for which she was quite young enough to wait, kindly proposed to stay at home and look after the house, Hugh and Giddings, but particularly Estelle. They all knew that he was very fond of his daughter, but could not realize how changed he was, until he made this offer, and they found that he was the "Restless Richard" no longer. Everybody noticed the change in him and approved of his settling down, all agreeing that it was quite time. Estelle was devoted to him, though Mona would always be first in the affections of the grateful girl. She often said, throwing her arms about Mona's waist, "Aunt Mona, I owe everything to you. How can I ever thank you?" To which Mona's invariable reply was, "By making the finest woman of yourself that it is possible for you to be."

Richard was delighted with Estelle's development, and also to find how pleasant it is to live for some one else besides himself. He grew exceedingly kind to Martha Preston, who attributed this with many other blessings to the influence of her daughter-in-law. After a long talk with Mona and a full confession to David, Richard decided to take their advice and never tell his stepmother of his part in her heartaches, though he would have gladly relieved his conscience by so doing.

They all three decided it was wiser not to disturb the peace, that had at last come into her troubled life, as much as such a confession from Richard certainly would have done.

But to return to the visit, it was a delightful trip. The two older women enjoyed nothing more than comparing notes about the dear boy they both so loved.

They petted him until Mona declared him spoiled beyond endurance, and Maud quite agreed with her, for she could never bear a " to-do " as she called it, over anybody.

Bess and Frank also came with their two babies, and nothing was needed to make this happy reunion complete.

Yet on their return home, Mona confided to her husband, one evening as she sat on his knee in their own room, that the happiest part of the whole trip was coming home.

He embraced her with delight, saying:

" My dear little girl, I am so glad you feel that way too. Here is our inheritance of work, responsibility and prosperity. We who have inherited eternal life must not squander too much of our time in idle pleasure, but must work the works of him who sent us while 'tis day; and home is the best place for us to do the work God has given us to do."

Whereupon she sealed his words with a sure sign of her approval, as a good wife should all the nobler impulses of her husband.

And here, in the glow of the firelight, with the promise of useful happy lives devoted to love and service, let us leave them.

THE END

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